
橘公司
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(Speakeasy)
Illustration
はいむらきよたか
2
zutto
matteta
いつか世界を救うために
―クオリディア・コード―
okurete
gomen
ne
ファンタジア文庫

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?

「お、女……の子？」

いつか世界を救うために 2

—クオリディア・コード—

A... girl?


「シノが勝ったら、私の首をあげる。
でももし私が勝ったら――シノをもらうよ」
「――大河。貴様、一体どんな〈世界〉を見ている」

"If you win, I'll give you my life... But if I win, you're mine."

"Tenkawa... What kind of [World] are you seeing?"


「……くっ抜かりました」
「天河さんから繋いだように見えましたけど……」
八重垣青生
舞姫を偏愛する神奈川四天王の一人。通称〈姫を導く者（プリンセスロード）〉。
「姫殿とおてて繋ぎなんて、なんて狡猾な……！」
音無柘榴
Zakuro Otonashi
舞姫を偏愛する神奈川四天王の一人。通称〈音無き死神（サイレント）〉。
佐治原銀呼
舞姫を偏愛する神奈川四天王の一人。通称〈番犬（アイギス）〉。
紫乃宮晶
Akira Shinomiya
舞姫を暗殺するため転校してきた少年、改め少女。
「……！　おい、天河」
「せっかく着替えたんだし、ちょっと街を歩こうよ」


DISCORD

Prologue: Hotaru

Hotaru's so damn cute.

So cute… and so strong! And so cool! She wasn't only the best athlete in school, but also the smartest student in class. The teachers praised her more than anyone else in school.

Yet despite all that, she never got ahead of herself. Every time I would tell her how amazing she was, she would timidly smile and thank me for the compliment. Even if she didn't think so herself, she would never say, "That's not true!" because she knew it would hurt my feelings.

I loved seeing her face when she smiled at me like that. It was the look of kindness in the purest form, and I couldn't get enough of it.

She wasn't only my friend, but also someone I looked up to.

Hotaru always tied her beautiful black hair into a ponytail. I was always jealous of it because it was a far cry away from my curly hair. There was one time where she offered to help tie my hair for me and I was happy that she said that, but I had to refuse. I didn't want her to feel awkward with us having the same hair.

To that, Hotaru just smiled and handed me a beautiful ribbon. She told me to use it if I ever changed my mind, and that made me so happy I couldn't contain myself. Even later on at night my heart was beating so fast from what had happened that day that I couldn't sleep at all.

Hotaru was never a talkative person, so there were other students in class who were somewhat afraid of her. But I knew better— Hotaru was the nicest person in the world.

When I was picked on by the boys, she would always come running to my defense. When I tripped and hurt my leg on the way back from school, Hotaru would gently carry me back to my house. When my dog died and I cried my heart out, Hotaru stayed by my side all night long.

Hotaru was the light in my world. With her by my side, I felt I could conquer the world. That's why when I saw the news of humanity's impending doom, I wasn't one bit scared. After all, I had Hotaru.

Hey Hotaru, I love you. Let's be together forever and ever. You don't need to be with anyone else. You only need me.

Hey Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru.

Hotaru. Hotaru.

Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru. Hotaru.

Hotaru. Hotaru.

Hotaru. Hotaru~

Chapter 1: The Biggest Dilemma

What made a soldier great?

Even with the generations of war that humanity had to endure throughout the years, it was a difficult question to answer. The answer would always be different no matter who was asked.

Perhaps some might answer with proficient skills and techniques. Some might say high endurance, or even the unwavering mental fortitude of charging straight into battle. And they all might as well be right.

However, to Shinomiya Akira —*Shino*— it was just the ability to be on guard. Humans by nature always had periods where they would let their guard down— whether it was from something as simple as sleeping or the momentary moment in battle when they would inevitably blank out.

Humans were nothing more than bags of meat put together. No matter how strong they got, there would always be moments when they were at their most vulnerable. Regardless of how much training they endured, they would be an easy target at that very moment.

That's why Shino devoted himself to reducing this vulnerability to as little time as possible. He trained himself so that he would wake up from the quietest of sounds. No matter how rattled he got, he would be able to compose himself in a fraction of a second. The most important aspect of being a soldier wasn't to defeat the enemy. No, it was to stay alive.

A person needed support from friends, organizations, and many others to become a fully fledged soldier. Over a long period of time, there would be plenty of time and money invested into that soldier. So, if that soldier died, all that investment would be for naught. Someone else would even be burdened with his or her duties, leading to mental and physical fatigue as the workload increased.

While little things like that didn't affect the battle in any noticeable way, these things added up and always had an impact on the outcome.

If Shino couldn't bring out his [World] anymore, there would be tremendous consequences. He knew how much responsibility he had on his shoulders and was fully aware of the impact he had in battle, so it was clear why he always tried to keep his guard up.

However, things were a little different this time…

"You?" Shino was clearly distraught at the request of his sudden visitor.

"Yeah… So please let me stay over!" Maihime shouted.

Even though Shino didn't even mean to ask that question out loud, he just sort of let it out instinctively. He was so shook over her request that Maihime could have killed him three times over if she really wanted to at that moment. It was a while before he was able to compose himself.

The two were still talking in Shino's dorm in Kanagawa, and it was already quite dark outside. Yet Maihime still came up specifically to his room to stay over.

Shino silently cursed himself for getting all rattled up and just stared her down. She was wearing the standard white Kanagawa school uniform and her usual white overcoat. She was small for her age, and it seemed like her fragile arms and legs could be easily broken. In fact, she looked like a trapped princess with her pure skin and white hair.

Despite that, Shino knew that her looks were deceiving. She was, without question, the strongest fighter in the city. That's why if she really wanted to, Maihime could have easily stormed into the room without anyone able to stop her.

The thought of that got Shino slightly riled up again, but he was able to suppress those feelings this time around.

"Why?"

"Well my room got blown to pieces, so I don't have a place to stay…"

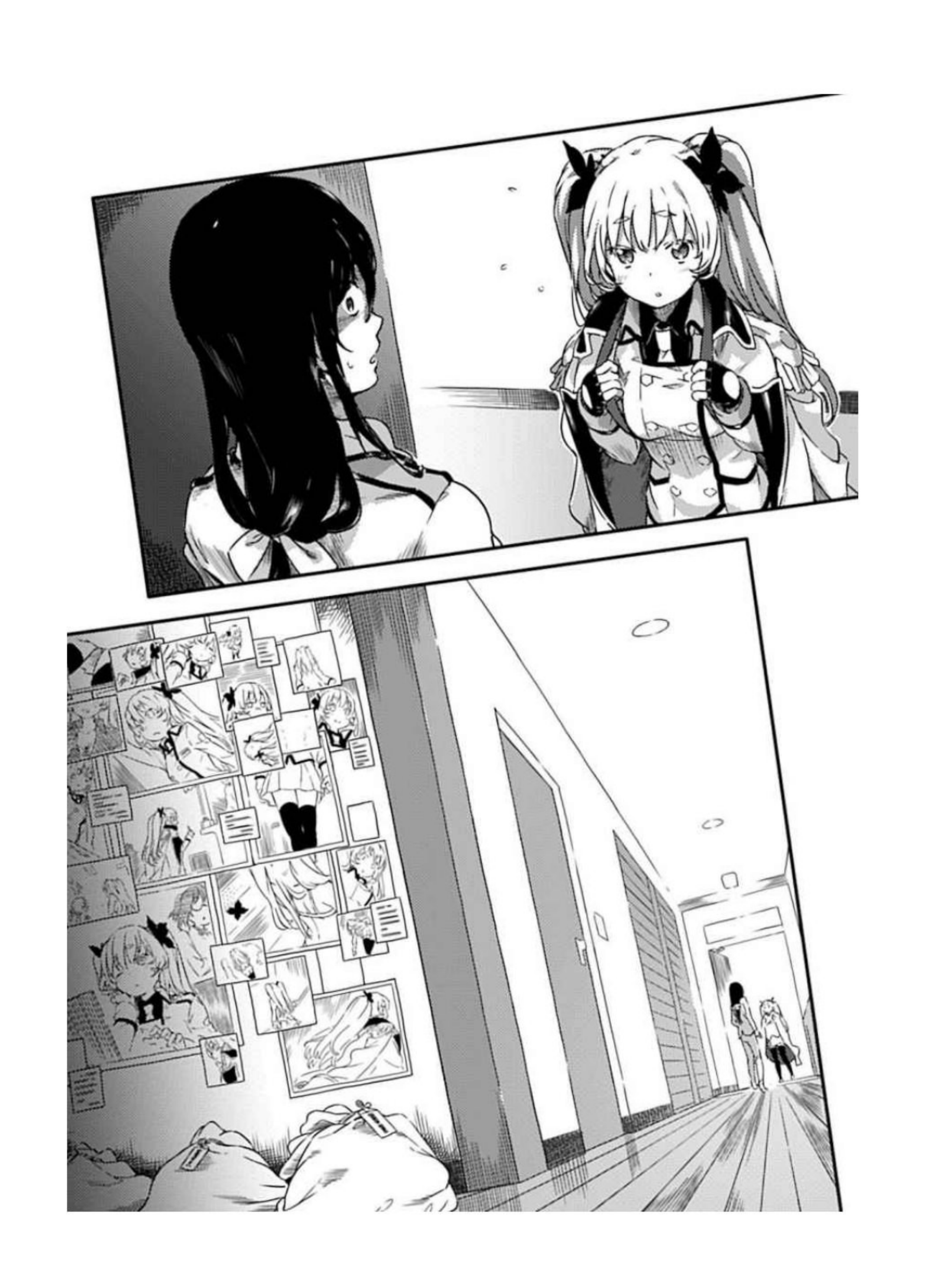
"Then why don't you go ask help from the Divine Pillars…"

"I am! Doing that right now!"

"Uhh…" Shino couldn't think of a response to that. Yes, it was true that due to his stellar accomplishments, Shino was forced into the student council and into the ranks of a Divine Pillar.

He must have been making a troubled face because Maihime suddenly said, "So that's a no…?" with a soft voice.

"Of course its a no," Shino thought in his head, but he didn't say it out loud. Instead, he silently took a look around his room. His room, he soon realized, was packed to the rim with things Maihime *probably* shouldn't see. There were her photos on his walls, her trash (from the bag of dreams) scattered around the room, and her videos displayed on the monitors. Even his telescope was still pointed at her now demolished dorm. If Maihime saw all of this, there's no telling what she might do. He had to avoid that at all costs.



Speaking of which, Shino neither stalking her nor infatuated with her. The information he gathered on her was all for one purpose only: to kill her. But, that's what made his current situation so difficult. The first thing that came to his mind was wondering why she came straight to him. Why didn't she ask the other Divine Pillars?
"It can't be…" he whispered under his breath. Did she already realize what was going on? Was she on to him already?
Even though Shino gave the upmost care for secrecy when investigating her, he was found out by the other Pillars along the way. There was always the possibility that they ratted her out, or perhaps Maihime just sensed that something was wrong.
That being said, she seemed totally clueless, but Shino knew better than to let his guard down. Straight up rejecting her request wouldn't be the right move because that would make her even more suspicious. His refusal could even be her breaking point to bust into his room, and there was no overpowering her if it came down to that. She was the strongest, after all.
"Uhh…" Shino hesitated for a moment. "Alright, but only for one night."
"R-Really?"
"Yeah. You'll have to give me a minute to clean up my room, though. I wasn't expecting any visitors."
"Okay!" Maihime replied happily. "I'll wait right here!"
Shino took a look at her innocent smile before closing the door. He turned around to his room. There was no way he could quickly hide the sheer amount of Maihime-related things scattered around.
"Hmm…" he thought to himself.
He had to think of something. First, he had to take all the photos off the wall as they were a dead giveaway to what was going on. But there was a huge problem with that
— it wasn't feasible to take down all of them quickly. So, after thinking about it, he grabbed some thumb tacks and pinned a big bed sheet over the entire wall.
"It's pretty ugly, but there's just not a whole lot I can do about it."
Of course, that was just the beginning. He then turned off all the monitors and nudged the telescope in a different direction. Last but not least, he took all of Maihime's carefully labelled items and shoved it all into his closet. They were stored in a bunch of ziploc bags, so they shouldn't be too damaged.
Maihime knocked on the door just as he finished up.
"Shino," she called out to him from the other side. "Can I come in now?"
Shino took another good look around his room before saying, "Yes, you can."
"Okay!" she said, carefully taking off her shoes. "So this is your room, huh?"
She walked in mesmerized, eagerly looking around the room. This obviously made Shino a bit nervous, so he kept a close eye on her.

“You can sit somewhere over there where the coat hanger is,” he said. “I’ll make you some tea.”
Maihime nodded obediently before hanging up her coat and taking a seat on Shino’s bed. As she did, Shino made his way to the kitchen. He didn’t waste a single second brewing the tea and bringing it out. However, once he walked out of the kitchen, he saw Maihime curiously reaching for the bed sheets that covered his walls.
“Don’t touch that!” he shouted out.
Maihime shuddered
— she didn’t expect Shino to react like that. “S-Sorry!” she said, her shoulders trembling in shock. “I-I was just curious… Why do you have sheets over your walls? I’m so sorry…”
Shino didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he put the tray on the table and started pouring out some tea.
“Well, you see,” he said after a long pause. “That wall has a lot of cracks. I put that there as a temporary measure so bits of the wall don’t fall in the room.”
“Oh, so that was it!” said Maihime. She looked at the wall a second time. “If there’s cracks in this wall, we gotta get it fixed soon. I’ll put in a request, so can I take a first look at it?”
Maihime reached out for the sheets once again, but Shino grabbed her arm before she could take it down.
“Wait. Wait a second. That was a lie.”
“What? A lie?”
“The thing is, there’s an imprint of a really creepy human face on the wall. I didn’t mind it at first, but sometimes at night I would hear some random screams and my body would go limp. I dealt with it by placing a seal on it and covering that with the sheet. Out of sight, out of mind, they say.”
“R-Really?”
“Really. You can feel the seals through the sheet.”
Maihime slowly went up to touch it. “Wow!” she shouted out. “There really is a seal…”
“Right? So don’t mess with it, or you could be cursed too.”
“Okay, I understand,” Maihime nodded meekly, nervously scooting away from the wall. She then diverted her attention to the tea that Shino had poured and asked, “Can I drink that?”
“Yeah, sure.”
Maihime took the cup and drank the whole thing in one gulp. That seemed to calm her down, since she curiously said, “Hey, what’s that telescope doing there?”
“Stargazing. One of my favorite hobbies.”
“Wow, that’s pretty cool. Then, what’s that monitor for?”
“Thats, uhh… for playing games…”
Maihime’s eyes widened. “Games?!?!”
“Not the games you’re thinking of. Educational games.”

“Oh, I see…”
Maihime sighed in disappointment, while Shino sighed in relief. If Shino had answered something that would have piqued her interest, Maihime might have been compelled to turn it on.
However, that wasn’t the last of Maihime’s curious adventures. This time, she eagerly pointed at the cameras next to the monitors.
“Hey, hey,” she said. “Can I look at that? I wanna see what kind of pictures you like to take!”
“Uhh…” Shino paused. He cursed himself for leaving them out there. Even if he had no time, he should have hid them somewhere safe. Of course, her just looking at the camera wouldn’t do any harm, but if she caught a glimpse of the pictures that he had taken… now that would be bad. Obviously, he couldn’t show her the pictures stored inside, but a refusal here would only lead to more of her suspicions.
“S-Sure… go for it. Though there’s nothing interesting in them…”
“I just want to see what kind of pictures you would take!”
Shino silently took the camera and began to hand it to her, until—
“Oops.” He threw the camera at the ground with such intensity that it shattered into a million pieces.
“What? What’s going on, Shino?” Maihime yelled out. There was no way to check the data now.
“Oh, sorry. My hand slipped.”
“Then why did you say oops beforehand?”
“I didn’t say oops.”
“Uhh, I…”
“For sure I didn’t say it,” Shino calmly interrupted. “If you did hear something, it could be from the thing on my wall.”
Maihime backed off in a panic and frantically shook the hand that she used to touch the sheet earlier. Shino knew it was a terrible excuse, but it seemed to do the trick. He cleaned up the bits of camera on the floor and laid it all out on the table.
“Uhh, Shino?” Maihime said nervously. “Can I use your bathroom?”
“Sure, it’s over there.”
“Thanks,” said Maihime, and she was off.
Shino silently fist pumped. This was the perfect chance to clean up anything that he may have missed beforehand. He couldn’t afford to risk another camera-like incident with her.
He quickly tried to remember all the hiding spots around his room to see if he forgot to hide anything else. There was just one thing he would soon realize, but it was in the bathroom…
“Oh my god,” he whispered to himself. He lunged at Maihime right as she was about to open the door and pulled her back. “Wait, don’t open that.”
“Huh?” Maihime turned back in surprise. “W-Why?”

“Well…” Shino stepped in between her and the door to prevent her from proceeding on. Obviously, he couldn’t tell her that he just remembered he left some of her photos in there that he had used to plan her assassination. “You see, I haven’t cleaned it in a while, so…”
“Oh, that’s what it was? It’s all good! I don’t mind…”
“It’s not all good. In any case, that’s a no go.”
Maihime pouted. “Aww man, really??
“*Tsk.* Alright, fine. You can enter, BUT, you have to cover your eyes.”
“Cover my eyes? What? How am I gonna… go?”
“I’ll help you then. Then it’s all good, right?”
“H-Help me?” Maihime’s face turned beet red. “Are you hearing what you’re saying?!?”
“I believe I made it quite clear I will help you. See, I’ll provide support as you do your business,” said Shino as he pretended to hold her up. “Don’t worry, I’ll even help you put your clothes back on. Alright, let’s do this.”
Maihime couldn’t contain her embarrassment any longer. “I-I’ll just use a bathroom outside…” she said. She carefully slipped past Shino and ran out of his room.
She peaced out so fast Shino didn’t have time to react, but once he got back to his senses, he immediately made his way to the bathroom. This wasn’t how he planned to get himself out of that sticky situation, though it did work out in the end.
“Alright, this should be everything,” he said, taking the pictures off of a shelf inside and shoving them into his pocket. He made sure to carefully check his room once again before Maihime came back again.
It wasn’t long before he heard Maihime knock on the door.
“Come in,” he said.
She hesitated before going, “O-Okay…” and entering. After carefully taking off her shoes and placing them on the rack, she sat back on the table and took a sip of tea.
“Sorry about that,” Shino continued. “I finished cleaning it when you were outside. Feel free to use it now.”
“R-Really?”
“Yup.”
“You won’t h-help me?”
“I can, just say the word.”
Maihime spat out her tea onto her clothes upon hearing that.
“What are you doing?” said Shino. He grabbed her a towel and pointed back at the bathroom. “You can change in there. You’ve brought a spare set, right? Go shower too. You don’t wanna catch a cold.”
“Ah, right. Thanks…” Maihime mumbled quietly. She took her spare set of clothes and made her way back into the shower room.
Shino sighed. “What was she doing?” he whispered to himself. His first thought was that she came back to confirm the suspicious she had of him from the beginning, but he noticed how nonchalant she was about the whole

thing. Right now she was undressing a door away, and she did come to him to stay the night, so it wouldn't make sense if she was suspicious of him at all. Besides, he couldn't feel any sort of tension from her actions.

On the other hand, this was the perfect chance for him to take her out. The opportunity would arise when she went to sleep… Or so he thought. Despite all that, he still felt a bit troubled. Maihime was the strongest fighter in the city. There was no guarantee she wouldn't just wake up and stop his blade.

Shino stopped himself in his tracks. That wasn't even a possibility — he was just thinking of excuses. It wasn't a question of whether he could pull off the assassination or not, but rather whether her death would be for the better. Shino had infiltrated the city for this mission, but in doing so, he came in contact with Maihime numerous times through conversations and even battles. From all that, he questioned whether she really needed to be killed.

Shino knew he belonged to the Administration Bureau. He knew he wasn't in a position to question their commands… but he just couldn't imagine slicing her throat. It made him sick to his stomach. Maihime was the pillar of this community and their symbol of hope. If she was taken out, then Kanagawa's defense capabilities would certainly be dealt a significant blow. But that wasn't the only thing keeping him from wanting to kill her. It was something simpler, something like the fact that he—

A horrid realization stopped him in his tracks. Just like how his walls had laminated pictures of Maihime plastered all over, his shower had the same as well. Everything he had worked so hard for would come to naught if Maihime saw it.

He cursed his foolishness as a pit of despair brewed from the bottom of his stomach. There was still a way out of this, though. His shower had a changing room as well, so there was a chance she didn't enter the actual shower yet since she had to change first.

"Tenkawa!" he shouted out. He busted through the door without hesitating. Luckily, Maihime didn't enter the shower yet, but her hand was right on its door. It seemed like he made it in time after all, so he breathed a sigh of relief to that.

Of course, that meant that Maihime was completely naked in his sight. He couldn't help but notice her pure white skin and her smooth hair that fell gently on her shoulders. Interestingly enough, despite her petite figure, he breasts were actually quite large.

That was all that he could see before Maihime shrieked out and covered herself up with her hands. She was surprised, but Shino definitely wasn't. In fact, he expected to see her naked. After all, no one showers with their clothes on.

While it was the perfect chance to take a good look at her muscles, Shino had more important things to do.

"I'm sorry Maihime, I haven't cleaned the shower too," he said calmly.

“W-What the… Huh?” Maihime stared out blankly with her lifeless eyes. She didn’t seem to have processed the situation just yet.
“Of course, you can still enter,” continued Shino, unfazed by Maihime’s reactions. “However, you have to keep your eyes closed. It’s okay though, I can help wash your body.”
Maihime screamed. Seeing Shino close in on her brought her back to reality. In a flash, she swiped up her clothes and used them to cover her body.
“W-W-W-WHY DID YOU OPEN THE DOOR?!??!” she shrieked. “I can’t b-b-believe this is happening!”
“I apologize. But please, close your eyes.”
“Huh?!?!?” Maihime couldn’t believe Shino was actually trying to get a towel over her eyes. She was going crazy.
“Calm down please.”
But that didn’t stop her. Shino knew that a swing of her arm could break concrete, so he had to be careful and keep his distance. He had no choice but to throw the towel onto her head, but he had a trick up his sleeve. Once the towel was in the air, he brought out his [World] and focused on looking at the towel.
With his [World], Shino closed his right fist. As a result, the towel immediately stopped in mid air, almost as if there was an imaginary hand holding it up.
Indeed, everyone had a [World] that had been used to help them survive the front lines. Thirty years ago, the [Unknowns] waged war with humanity, forcing them to protect their children by sending them off into a cold sleep until everything blew over.
However, the moment those children woke up, they brought the [Worlds] they saw from their dreams into reality. They were able to use this power to fend off the remnants of the [Unknowns] that still lingered around.
Shino’s [World] allowed him to manipulate distant objects as if they were within arms reach given that he could see them. In essence, he could touch anything in his sight. He manipulated the towel so that it wrapped around her head, and tied it up with a flick of his wrist.
“What’s going on!?!?” Maihime grew increasingly more panicked once she couldn’t see anymore. She blindly ran forward in an attempt to shake the towel off of her.
Maihime’s reaction was so unexpected Shino couldn’t dodge in time. They both bumped into each other and knocked each other down, rolling around in a tangled mess.
“Huh? What was that? An earthquake?!?” Maihime shouted out while desperately trying to kick her legs free. “Or something worse!?!”
“Tenkawa, calm down.”
Shino tried to massage her shoulders in an effort to calm her down, but as he did—

“Maihime! You were here!?” someone shouted out as the door was slammed open.
“Are you okay you aren’t hurt right what is going on.”
Two girls suddenly made their way into Shino’s room. One of them was taller than average with rough, short hair, while the other wore a panda hoodie that went over her eyes.
The two were part of the Four Divine Pillars, specifically Ginko Sajihara, [Aegis], and Zakuro Otonashi, [Silent]. They both served Maihime as if she was their one true god. So it was no surprise that they were rendered completely speechless once they saw her completely naked on the floor with her eyes bounded by the towel. Shino lying on top of her didn’t help clear things up as well.
“W-W-WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING SHINO!?!?
“I mean you even had to put a blindfold on her Shino how far does you obsession lie…”
The two lashed out in anger, but Shino remained unfazed.
“Sajihara and Otonashi. Why are you two here?” he asked calmly.
Ginko slammed the wall. “We were obviously aware that Maihime’s room was destroyed!”
“Yet she didn’t come to us and didn’t come to Aoi which means there was only one place she could have gone,” Zakuro said with a follow up.
They had only begun their rant, but seeing Maihime naked immediately put the two into a trance.
“… get the … away … !” continued … Now get the …
Ginko.
“Exactly…… We won’t let you…. lay another… finger on her….”
Shino paused before saying, “Could I have a word with you two?”
“… discuss … you … attacked h… !!”
Ginko shouted back.
“I seriously don’t know what you’re saying,” replied Shino. “Can you at least talk without shoving your face in Maihime’s clothes…?”
Ginko stopped. Just as Shino had said, she was voraciously sniffing Maihime’s clothes on the ground, but she pulled away once Shino pointed that out. Somehow this person was the same person who was criticizing him just now for going to far.
“So……. Do you have…… anything to say…… you scum…..!”
Zakuro, on the other hand, was blazing around the room snapping pictures of the naked Maihime.
“Otonashi,” Shino said sternly. “Stop moving around.”
Just his sharp words alone took them out of that trance.
“What were we doing??” they said out loud. Perhaps they were just conditioned to do it automatically.
Maihime also seemed to have calmed down by now, so she finally took the towel off of her eyes.
“Ginko, Zakuro?” she said.

Her words immediately straightened them up. Ginko tried to pretend like she was handing Maihime her own clothes, while Zakuro quietly hid the camera away from her.
“Here, Maihime, take them,” Ginko said as she held her clothes out.
“S-Sure.” Maihime took the clothes, although she was wondering why Ginko had them in the first place. However, her eyes quickly went back to Shino and she remembered what travesty had just occurred. Her face went red even after she frantically got dressed in an evening gown.
Ginko was understandably disappointed that she didn’t have the pleasure of looking at her naked body anymore, but the thought of Maihime not wearing anything under her gown cheered her back up.
“Now, Shino,” she said. “You got some explaining to do… Why were you down on the ground with her while she was naked? I’m so jeal—nevermind.”
“Wait, I was just—”
Zakuro again glared at her panda. “We don’t need to hear his explanation why don’t we just hand him to the Administration Bureau and have them lock him up!”
“No that’s not it!” interrupted Maihime. “Sure I was surprised when he opened the door, but I came here to stay the night at his place… So it’s not his fault…”
The two were left speechless by the gentle words Maihime had for Shino. That didn’t change the fact that they were still highly suspicious of him, though.
Shino determined that it wouldn’t be good to leave it like this. He had to somehow get on good terms with the other two or else it would cause problems down the road.
“Hey, how about this,” he said, motioning them to come closer.
Zakuro’s eyes narrowed. “What is it now it’s too late to bribe now,” she said.
Since the two didn’t come closer, Shino went up to them. “Let’s just get this cleared up,” he whispered.
“What do you mean?”
“I’m not trying to do anything bad to her,” Shino explained. “I just didn’t want her entering my shower.”
“What’s so bad about your shower…”
Shino silently walked up to the shower room door and slightly cracked it open. The two couldn’t help but peak inside.
“Ah, I see now,” nodded Ginko once she got a good look inside.
“Okay yeah we certainly can’t be showing that to Maihime,” said Zakuro.
In a moment’s notice, the two understood the situation completely.
“So yeah, that’s that,” nodded Shino. He knew he had nothing to lose by showing them the pictures of Maihime on the wall as they probably had done the same. Shino was sure that their rooms were just as bad, if not worse, than his was right now.

Of course, Shino wasn't obsessed with Maihime like the other two were, but he sure looked like he was in their eyes. In fact, from his previous encounters with the two, the three shared a common bond. Shino took advantage of this bond to hide his true intentions, and it was working perfectly so far.
"Huh, what's in there? I wanna see!" Maihime said as she stood up and made her way to the shower door. Seeing Ginko and Zakuro's reactions only made her more curious.
"Wait a second, Maihime," interrupted Ginko. "It'll be bad if you went any further."
"Exactly everyone has their secrets so just let's just forget about it for now."
"O-Oh, alright then," nodded Maihime. The sudden assertiveness of the two caught her by surprise, but their smiles put her back at ease.
"In any case," continued Ginko. "Maihime will either stay with me or Zakuro tonight."
"Ah yes, go ahead," said Shino. If anything, this was what he wanted them to do.
On the other hand, Maihime heard that and drooped her head down. "I-I'm sorry, Shino. I guess I wanted to talk to you more, but I was a bother, so sorry…"
Shino sighed. "No, it's not like that. You came all of a sudden so I didn't have time to prepare, that's all. Nothing else."
"Really?" Maihime's eyes lit up. "So I can come next time?"
"As long as you let me know beforehand, then of course."
"Okay!" Maihime cheered up. She grabbed Zakuro and Ginko's hand and led them out the door. "Alright, see you tomorrow!"
"Sure…" said Shino as he waved goodbye.
Maihime slammed the door behind her with a smile. The force of that rattled the closet door enough to bust it open, and Maihime related goods came spilling out.
Thank goodness it held on, if barely, when they were still here. What happened today was far too stressful for Shino's liking. If he were to continue from here, he had to be more careful. Another event like Maihime's dorm suddenly getting blown up shouldn't catch him off guard anymore.
The only ones who should shoot are those who were prepared to get shot at. Likewise, those who stalk others must be prepared to be stalked themselves. Shino understood that clearly, but he just didn't expect Maihime to come directly to his dorm.
He silently vowed to never let this happen again. In order to do that, he had to do a complete makeover of his room. At this rate, if Maihime ever came again, he would only be repeating the same mistakes. Perhaps he could move everything to the room next door…
At that moment, Shino's eyes lit up. Someone was coming into his room.

“Wait, Maihime, don’t misunderstand,” he said inadvertently, assuming Maihime was coming back to get something. “I’m only gathering all this because I’m really curious about you….”
“Ah, so that’s the excuse you’re going with,” said the girl coming in.
It wasn’t Maihime, but rather another girl her size. She was wearing the same school uniform and had her ponytail tied up with a green ribbon. She, of course, was Hotaru Rindou, another assassin sent from the Administration Bureau.
“Oh, Hotaru, huh? Don’t scare me like that.”
Hotaru closed the door behind her. “I wasn’t trying to,” she said with a sigh. “What a disaster. That’s why I said you shouldn’t get too close with her…”
“You were watching?”
“Just a bit. I made Maihime my *friend*, and she told me everything.”
Shino stayed silent. A *friend* to Hotaru was nothing more than a slave to her [World]. In fact, she could make *friends* with just a touch of her hand.
“Ah, you’re probably wondering why I didn’t help you out?” said Hotaru. “Well, from the beginning I told you I wouldn’t show myself to her at all, didn’t I?”
“No, that’s not it. It’s just that you should be more careful using that.”
“It’s all good. I don’t keep them in my [World] for long before I release them,” she said, touching the air in front of her. With just another touch and a “release” chant, Hotaru could reverse the effect she had on other people. When that happened, they would lose all memory of ever meeting her in the first place.
Hotaru slowly made her way up to the items scattered on the floor. For some reason, she seemed to act a bit different than her usual self.
“Hey, Shino,” she said.
“What?”
“Just to make sure, you didn’t forget the mission, right?”she asked coldly.
Yes, the all too important mission. He understood the mission fine. He just didn’t know why Maihime had to be killed off.
Shino looked away and sighed. “No I didn’t. You don’t have to remind me.”
Hotaru immediately grabbed Shino’s necktie and pulled him close to her.
“Then why?” she shouted. “Why didn’t you just poison the tea? This was the perfect chance to carry it out, and I know you wouldn’t miss such an opportunity!”
Shino didn’t say a word as he swatted her away.
“Let’s assume we killed her here,” he said after a pause. “What are you gonna do with the body? Sajihara and Zakuro were literally right around the corner too, so if I had done anything back then, we would be running for our lives right now.”
“That might be kind of romantic…” Hotaru said with a chuckle. “The two of us, eloping together…”
“Enough.”
Hotaru pouted. “Alright, but don’t forget— We must kill her.”

“I know.”
“You sure?”
“Yeah,” said Shino. “Tomorrow I start as an official member of the student council. It’ll start to get real easy to get close to her.”
“Okay, I look forward to it.”
Shino stayed quiet as Hotaru left the room.
—
The next day, Maihime and the Four Pillars were gathered in the student council room. Maihime carefully brought out a certificate and a medal to hand to Shino.
“Now then, Shino,” she said. “No wait
— Shinomiya. We acknowledge your efforts to make this city a safer place, so we welcome you to the student council! Let us protect the city together from this day forward!”
The three other Pillars —Ginko, Zakuro, and the glasses wearing Yaegaki— clapped after Maihime finished her little speech. Nabariya Kurisu was the former fourth Pillar, but since she was outed as a spy from Tokyo and thus currently sitting in a detention center until her sentencing, Shino was able to take her place. After all, it was his hard efforts that helped them catch her in the first place.
“I graciously accept,” Shino said with a bow.
With that, Shino was an official member of the student council. Now he could freely enter and leave the council room. Even better, it would be trivial to sneak some poison into Maihime’s tea and snacks as Hotaru had mentioned earlier. Of course, Shino would have reservations about the possibility of poisoning other people, and assassinating her like that would have people pointing their finger at him pretty quickly.
Shino stopped his train of thought. It was like he was desperately trying to find reasons not to kill her.
“Umm, Shinomiya?” Aoi called out to him.
“What is it?”
“I thought I’d explain what we do for a little bit…”
“Oh, okay, then please go ahead.”
“Well, our main responsibility is to command the troops in case of an [Unknown] attack. We also not only have to manage the city in a day to day basis, but also look at the big picture as well. Shinomiya, I think— Woah!”
Ginko and Zakuro suddenly mobbed her in the middle of her explanation.
“Before that, we gotta do something else!” shouted Ginko.
“Exactly I would like a mock battle with this man for educational purposes of course,” nodded Zakuro.
The two ignored Aoi and closed in on Shino. Aoi was helpless as she was caught in the crossfire, so she could do nothing but watch on.
“I know we’ve lost to you once, but don’t get all high and mighty because of it!”
“Exactly what Ginko said it is time to take back what we lost.”

“Umm… but our duties…” interrupted Aoi. She had to adjust her glasses after being thrashed around by the two.
“Forget about that!”
“W-We can’t…” she said, collapsing to the ground in despair. “We finally got someone capable…”
Ginko and Zakuro continued to ignore her and focused their attention solely on Shino. They were no doubt still jealous of their loss.
Shino held them back with his hands. “I’d like to accept,” he said, “but you two have to wait.”
“Why?” said Zakuro, while Ginko continued with, “You scared or what?”
Shino calmly shook his head no.
“Sorry, but I don’t have a weapon to fight with right now,” he said. “So I actually need help applying for a new one. It doesn’t have to be anything special, I’d just like a katana.”
“Ohhhhh,” the two said in unison.
Unfortunately, Shino had used a forbidden art in the previous battle and broke his katana as a result.
“I see…” Maihime piped in, sulking. “It’s my fault, huh. I’m sorry…”
It was true that Shino had to use his third Art to save Maihime from a Triton-class [Unknown], so it was natural that she would feel responsible.
“There’s no need to apologize,” replied Shino. “I used my Art through my own accord. The only one who needs to apologize is my own self. It was my inexperience that made the blade break.”
Maihime wasn’t convinced. She looked like a puppy that had been scolded, unable to look Shino in the eye.
“Oh!” here eyes suddenly lighted up.
“What?”
She frantically backtracked and shook her head no. “U-Uhh, it’s nothing! I just have something to do right now, so I’ll be back!”
And just like that she was gone, leaving the four Pillars behind in confusion.
—
There was a few minutes of silence after Maihime took off until Shino finally said something.
“So… is that it? Can we go home?” he asked with a sigh.
Aoi nodded. “Yes, the only thing on our agenda was your induction, so…”
“Wait a minute!” interrupted Ginko.
“Yeah we can’t have you leaving just yet,” Zakuro added.
“Why? Do you two still need anything from me?”
“Yes, we do,” said Ginko. “It’s true that you’ve become an official member of the Student Council. For that, I congratulate you.”
“But that’s only in name only.”
“In name only?” said Shino.
“Exactly. W*e* don’t acknowledge you yet as a protector and servant of Maihime isn’t that right Ginko and Aoi.”
“Exactly!” said Ginko.

Aoi was confused. “I mean, I already do…” she said, but the other two stared her down before she could say any more.
“Anyways,” said Ginko, “let’s get back on track. Of course, I’m sure we will never betray Maihime, but we want to make sure. Shino, we want to confirm you really belong with us.”
“Sure… but how?”
Zakuro chuckled and said, “As is tradition.”
“A special exam for the Four Pillars,” continued Ginko, “Maihime’s fan quiz!”
Once they finished, they struck a rather odd and exaggerated pose. Aoi did the same as well after some hesitation, but she clearly wasn’t feeling it. Shino wondered if he would also be forced to do this as well.
“The Divine Pillars *must* know everything all there is about Maihime!” said Ginko. “If you can answer the questions we give you, we’ll acknowledge you as one of us.”
“Okay, go for it,” Shino said begrudgingly. He didn’t want to do it, but if he refused to do so it might cause problems down the road.
Hearing that, Zakuro slapped Aoi on the back. “Alright Aoi please give the first question,” she said.
“Huh, me?”
Aoi didn’t seem to want to participate either, but Zakuro’s panda was staring her down so she had to go for it.
“O-Okay…” she said, struggling to think of something. “What about Maihime’s blood—”
“O-Type,” Shino answered immediately.
“Wow, that’s right. You sure know your stuff, huh,” she replied after giving him a little clap.
Everything begins with observation. If Shino didn’t know something as trivial as that, he didn’t deserve to be an assassin. After all, he had spent countless hours memorizing facts about his target that may prove to be useful in the future.
Zakuro and Ginko must have also thought the question was too easy, even though they were unaware of why Shino knew that information in the first place. The two of them sighed at the same time.
“You sure are soft aren’t you Aoi,” said Zakuro.
“Well, it’s okay,” said Ginko. “I knew Shino wasn’t the type of man to be tripped up by a question of that level, but that wasn’t bad for a first question.”
Zakuro took a step forward towards Shino. “I guess so Ginko next question will be mine okay and just to warn you I’m not as kind as Aoi here.”
She flashily took out two pictures from her bag and laid them out on the table.
“Do you know whats the difference between these two folders?” she asked.
“Huh?”

Shino was stumped. He crossed his arms in an attempt to think about it with Ginko and Aoi doing the same. The two pictures were both of Maihime in her usual uniformed outfit walking down a scenic route. She wasn't looking at the camera, so it was safe to assume Zakuro took them in secret.
"Hmmm." Of course the scenery and composition were similar, but things like Maihime's expression or the way her uniform swayed in the wind were ever so slightly different. Knowing Zakuro, she probably wasn't asking about these minor details. There must have been something bigger that she was looking for. It was supposed to be much harder than Aoi's question.
Shino focused on the two pictures simultaneously. Yes, he could say her expression or her posture was a bit different. Maybe he could point out her clothes were slightly off from one another. However, if he took all that into account…
Zakuro giggled as she watched Shino struggle. "As I thought this was a bit too difficult to you only I can know the real difference so if you need a hint I would be happy to—"
"I got it," interrupted Shino.
"No way!" Zakuro snapped back.
"A-A-Are you serious?" asked Aoi.
"Yeah. I bet the Maihime on the left… isn't wearing any underwear," said Shino. He pointed to the picture on the left and continued. "Her expression here is a bit stiffer than the one on the right. You can also see that she's sweating harder, but not only that, her feet are about seven centimeters narrower than her usual walking stance. I thought at first maybe she needed to go to the bathroom, but the creases on her uniform gives it all away. Her breasts are slightly more defined in this one too."
He wanted to point out that Maihime's expression and posture in the left picture were very similar to how she was when she was caught naked in his bathroom, but he determined that it was better left unspoken.
Zakuro let out a nervous sigh after hearing his explanation. "Yeah you are indeed correct the left one was when I apologized to Maihime and washed all her underwear but she had to go out suddenly and whats left is this cute expression on her."
She paused to squeal in delight before getting back on track. "It is impressive though that you managed to get that without any hints."
"Yeah," said Aoi. "I couldn't answer it at all… Could you, Sajihara?"
"O-Of course I could! What kind of Divine Pillar can't answer theses q-questions!??"
"But you looked pretty stumped…" said Aoi.
"No I didn't! You were just imagining it! A-Anyways, the third question is mine! So get ready!"
Ginko took out five ziplock bags and laid them all out on the table. Shino's eyes widened upon looking at it.
"These are five socks collected from Maihime!" shouted Ginko. "All you have to do is order them from oldest to newest!"

“There’s no way that’s possible!” Aoi shouted back.
“It is possible!” vehemently denied Ginko. “If you have what it takes, this will be super easy!”
“Yeah but what do you mean by what it takes…” said Aoi.
Unlike Aoi, Shino was calm. In fact, he didn’t seem troubled at all as he took out each of the socks. After carefully inspecting each one even from its smell, he rearranged them back up on the table.
“How about this? The left one is the oldest and so on.”
“Huh?” said Ginko. “I see, I see. But I see that you forgot to line up a sock… Where would you put that?”
Of the five socks that he had to line up, Shino only lined up four of them. Ginko took that last one and waved it around.
Seeing this, Shino shook his head. “I won’t be lining up that one.”
“Why not?”
“Because it’s not her sock.”
Ginko slammed the sock onto the table. “T-That’s… right…” she said with a sigh. “How did you know?”
“Well the first thing that bothered me was that it was made with a slightly thinner cloth. Plus, the other socks are dirty and worn out, but unlike them this one has holes in it. Also I couldn’t help but notice that this one had a slightly stronger smell.”
“Exactly,” murmured Ginko, slumping her shoulders in despair. “You’re right. It belonged to Aoi and not Maihime. It was supposed to be a trick question…”
Aoi’s eyes widened. “M-Mine?? When did you get that??!?! And what did you mean the smell is strong?!?”
“Don’t worry, I could have been wrong.”
“I feel like you’re just saying that t-to make me feel better,” she shouted back emotionally. Tears were welling up in her eyes as the toll of being bullied around finally got to her. However, Ginko remained unfazed. She cold-heartedly threw Aoi’s sock in the garbage right in front of her. Obviously, Aoi didn’t take too kindly to that.
“Y-You did better than I expected,” said Ginko. “But this isn’t over, since—”
Her phone suddenly rang in her pocket, interrupting her speech. Zakuro and Aoi also seemed to notice something was up.
Ginko took one look at her phone and jumped back in surprised. “Sorry, I gotta go, Shino!” she shouted out. “We’ll continue this some other time!”
“Wait,” Shino said, eyeing her suspiciously. “So do I pass?”
“It’s unfortunate… but I guess you pass for now. Don’t let your guard down, though! This happens every meeting! I’ll get you next time!”
She was out the door before Shino could say anything more. Similarly, Aoi and Zakuro, who also took a peek at Ginko’s cell phone, seemed to be itching to leave.
“I have to go too see ya,” said Zakuro.
“Then me too…” said Aoi.

Shino could do nothing but stare at them walking out. Since there was nothing else to do, he shut all the windows and made his exit as well, locking the door behind him.

Chapter 2: When you peer into the abyss, the abyss peers back

“Alright!”

Ginko pulled out a compact mirror and took a quick look at her front bangs. It had just turned nighttime and she was outside in the middle of the city. It wasn’t like she was obsessed with her hair or anything like that, but she just didn’t know how to style her bangs. In any case, she just shrugged it off — it wasn’t anything she should be worried about. Getting into the right state of mind was far more important.

She threw the compact mirror back into her pocket and tried to quell her excitement. Her skipping and humming without a care in the world didn’t seem to help that at all. She was just too happy.

Of course, there was a good reason for it. She took out her phone once again where it showed a message from Maihime a few hours ago.

She chuckled to herself. “Maihime wants to talk to me, huh? I wonder what for.”

Indeed, Maihime had asked her to meet up at her new dorm. Of course, her old one blew up, so she was staying in a new place until that was fixed. Luckily she was successful in snatching her away from Shino’s grasp, so the day before yesterday she had stayed over at her place. Zakuro stayed too because of a won rock-paper-scissors match, but that’s beside the point. Ginko vowed to preserve the sheets and blankets Maihime had used that night forever and ever. In fact, she vowed to pass it down from generation to generation, savoring the leftover scent for special occasions.

Anyways, Ginko was heading to Maihime’s temporary dorm. Her excitement was at an all time high, so high that she was in ecstasy even though nothing had happened yet.

“Huh?” Upon approaching the dorm, Ginko suddenly stopped in her tracks. She spotted a just as excited Zakuro skipping from the left and Aoi coming from the right.

“Huh? What are you two doing here at this time?” she asked them.

“That’s my line what are you two doing here?” Zakuro snapped back.

“Hmm…” Aoi’s eyes lit up. “Ah, maybe Tenkawa called all of us here?”

Hearing that, Ginko and Zakuro went completely silent for a few moments before sighing out loud.

“D-Did I say something wrong…?” Aoi said in a panic.

“No you didn’t…” said Zakuro.

“Yeah… It’s just that I can feel my dreams vanishing in front of my very eyes.”

They were disappointed that they weren’t the only ones invited, even though Maihime always invited them as a group. At the very least, it wasn’t

like they weren’t needed anymore. So, Ginko fixed up her posture and knocked on the door.
“Maihime, I’m here!” she said.
“Welcome! Just a sec!” Maihime said, opening the door.
They couldn’t help but stare at Maihime the moment she let them in. She was so cute that Ginko and Zakuro were rendered speechless
— she had just taken a shower and had changed into her pajamas. Surely they were going to have a nosebleed any moment now.
“Huh? What’s wrong you two?” asked Maihime.





“Nothing is wrong don’t worry about it,” Zakuro replied.
“Alright then… come on in!” Maihime ushered them in, but Zakuro and Ginko had to walk with their heads pointed upwards to prevent any nosebleeds.
Her room was full of stuffed animal and other small accessories like her previous one. Even though her original room had been completely destroyed, it seemed that at least some of her belongings survived. However, she didn’t have everything set up neatly since it was just a temporary space.
“S-So anyways, what did you want to discuss?” asked Ginko.
“Ah yes,” replied Maihime, spreading out some documents on the table. “Please take a look here…”
The three looked at the same time. The documents seemed to be an order for some materials used to build specialized weapons.
The three cities that protected Japan
—Tokyo, Chiba, and Kanagawa— all had their own specializations. For example, Tokyo had all the governmental buildings and Chiba had all the manufacturing plants. Likewise, Kanagawa had the facilities required to build specialized weapons.
Maihime was not only regarded as the strongest swordsman alive, but also the overseer of all specialized weapons.
“It’s rare for you to order the materials yourself. Are you trying to…” Aoi paused, taking another look at the documents. “Hmm… This sword is a little small for you… In fact, it’s more like a katana…”
Ginko raised her eyebrows. “A katana?”
Ginko and Zakuro both realized that there was only one person they knew who used a katana.
“Maihime you don’t mean…” said Zakuro.
“Yeah… It’s for Shino. Do you think he’ll be surprised?” she replied with a timid smile.
Obviously, the two didn’t take kindly to this, but Maihime’s smile was so cute they didn’t know how to react, so they did something in between the two emotions.
“A-Are you two okay?”
“We’re fine, Maihime,” reassured Ginko.
“Yeah, no problem at all no problem at all I guess the world really isn’t fair…” said Zakuro.
“O-Okay…” Maihime paused to process what she just heard. “Well, anyways, it’s my fault Shino broke his weapon, so I thought I’d get him a present. Shino had a really nice katana, but if I make his with only the best materials we have to offer, I’m sure it will be able to withstand much more than his previous one.”
“Only the best? You mean.. using only pure magisteel?” Aoi said in shock.

Magisteel was a type of metal that greatly enhanced the output of the specialized weapons by allowing users to bring out the full potential of their [World]. The higher the purity, the more power they could use.
However, a certain degree of control was needed fully utilize it. If the user was unworthy of such a weapon, their power would decrease dramatically, essentially making the weapon no better than a simple block of metal.
The optimal percentage of magisteel in a weapon for a regular student was about twenty to thirty percent. Elites, like the Divine Pillars, could go up to fifty to sixty percent. Only Maihime was able to wield a weapon consisted solely of magisteel.
Not only that, it was insanely expensive. It was even cheaper to make a weapon out of pure gold, not to mention the high skill and dexterity required to craft such a weapon. It certainly wasn't doable on a whim, and took hours and hours of planning to even begin the arduous process.
"Yeah. I have full confidence that Shino could master it. Aren't you all curious to see how powerful he can become?"
"I guess..." Ginko's voice trailed off. She sympathized with Maihime even through all the jealously. After all, Shino was the second person to defeat her after Maihime, so she couldn't help but wonder how strong he could get with the greatest weapon they could create. She wasn't dying to know the answer to that, but she did feel a little hyped up.
Ginko wasn't the only person feeling like that. Zakuro looked disappointed as well, even though her lips trembled with excitement.
"The problem is..." Maihime suddenly shifted her tone to a darker note.
"What is it?" asked Ginko.
"I can get the materials fine I think, but I need his measurements to make it perfect. Getting those measurements from him would ruin the surprise though..."
Above even the materials used, the size of the weapon was the most important. In the most extreme cases, a single millimeter could make or break a weapon for the user, especially if it was made for close combat. She had to get his arm length and his height at the very least to make anything good for him.
"I see," nodded Ginko. "So that's why you called us over."
"Yeah... sorry everyone. I know you're all busy, but I just needed some input from you all."
The three immediately shook their head no at the same time.
"Don't be silly, Maihime. You don't need to apologize. After all, I'm glad to be of service," reassured Ginko.
Zakuro chimed in as well. "Exactly don't worry about it in fact I'd appreciate if you called us out more any day any night we'll be there for you twenty four seven."
"Ginko... Zakuro... you girls..." Maihime said, tearing up a little.

“So essentially, you want to stay with her all day and night?” Aoi asked jokingly, but it was too late. Ginko and Zakuro were already deep in thought.
“Hmm…” murmured Ginko. “There has to be a way…”
“It’s a tall order but I agree there’s something we can do here,” said Zakuro. She paused, then smirked. “Ah yes we can do *that*.”
“Yeah, Maihime, leave *that* to us.”
“What do you mean by that..?”
Aoi could do nothing but smile bitterly at the situation off to the side. She knew what they were up to.
—
Kanagawa was a city that did well to survive to the current year of 2049. To put it more precisely, it was rebuilt as a fortress where the old Yokohama City used to be after almost getting completely destroyed by the [Unknowns].
There were multiple watchtowers along the coast that not only served as a lookout for incoming [Unknown] attacks, but also as the very first line of defense. Even though the attacks may not come very often, they always had to be on the lookout.
As Shino walked down the street, he looked at the various shops lined up in front of him. From a glance, it would be impossible to tell that the city was at war because of how lively it was right now.
“What a busy town,” he said to himself.
Most of the people who lived in this city were students that belonged to the academy, so it would make sense that the streets would be bustling right now after school. It was so busy that the area was turned white from the sheer amount of students wearing the standard white uniform.
Just because the whole country was at war didn’t mean that everyone had to be on their toes 24/7. If that were the case, they would have been burned out years ago. In a situation where they didn’t know when the enemy would attack next, it was far superior to rest up and relax whenever possible. Good soldiers were able to utilize this to the best of their abilities.
Of course, after watching the students nonchalantly go in and out of the stores, it was hard to tell if they were even aware of this themselves. Why would they though? The alarms weren’t ringing, so there wasn’t any reason to treat today any differently than any other peaceful day.
“Huh?” Shino suddenly felt the glare of someone or something. He took a katana from warehouse yesterday so at least he had something to fight with, but it only consisted of about thirty percent magisteel and the blade felt a tad too long. Despite that, he had a weapon and wasn’t afraid to use it.
Kanagawa was known as the maker of specialized weapons, so he could have easily ordered a new katana from one of the many places here that makes them. However, he decided that he would leave as little trace of himself as possible here since he was still on his secret mission.

At that moment, he spotted some girls whispering and taking quick peeks at him in front of a cafe. Once he caught the eyes of them, they timidly turned back to each other and tried to hide.

Shino sighed. It seemed like those were the glares that he sensed. Ever since he joined the Divine Pillars, that sort of thing became much more common. It was the last thing he wanted to happen to him.

At the same time, he didn't want any weird rumors spreading about him. He walked up to them and gave them a quick slap on the back before carrying on his business.

—

Zakuro stopped to calm herself down besides the wall of one of the stores downtown,. She wasn't all riled up because of something like Maihime kissing her on the cheek or sneaking a glimpse at her panties. She wasn't excited— No, she was nervous.

"Are you okay, Zakuro?"

"Yeah… I think so," she said, though seeing Maihime worried for her seemed to make her even more nervous. With sweat dripping down her forehead, she had to take a few deep breaths against the wall to calm herself down.

"Wow I didn't expect him to somehow notice me from that angle," she said, taking another look at Shino walking down the street. She was trying to take pictures of Shino just now, but his sharp senses shut her down immediately. Zakuro wasn't even being overtly obvious— Using her [World], she could teleport behind him and back in the blink of an eye. Getting noticed was the last thing she had expected.

If he noticed her behind him, then other angles probably wouldn't work as well.

"What a guy Shino," said Ginko. "This is gonna be hard. If even Zakuro can't take a photo, then no one else in this country could."

"I guess so," agreed Aoi.

"I'm such a failure…" said Zakuro, covering her eyes in shame.

As one might have imagined, Zakuro and crew were trying to take pictures of Shino so they could get his measurements. It was possible to get accurate numbers by comparing the relative sizes of different objects within the picture. That's why the other Pillars relied on Zakuro to take this crucial photo, though it seemed even Zakuro was unable to do such a feat.

She had fought Shino once before, so it was possible that he got used to her [World] from that battle. It was also possible that Zakuro just didn't have the same motivation taking pictures of Shino as she did with Maihime.

Speaking of which, Maihime had a troubled look hearing all this go down.

"What's the matter, Maihime?" Ginko asked.

"Well… I mean, sure I want find out how tall he is, but isn't this illegal? Aren't we stalking him?"

The three fell silent as they sweated nervously. It took a few seconds before Zakuro was able to whip up an explanation.

“No that’s not it this is the only way we can do it…”
“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Sorry for being a downer, especially since you’re all doing it for me…”
“No worries,” reassured Zakuro.
“But I can’t shake the feeling that we’re essentially taking pictures of him without his consent. He’ll be so grossed out if he found out what we’re doing…”
Zakuro was hurt by that comment. Being the city’s most famous “photographer,” that’s pretty much all she did. All her pictures were of Maihime, and even though she knew she wasn’t doing the most honorable of things, her heart sunk after she heard Maihime say that. Hearing it straight from her was equivalent to having a lightning bolt striking her down.
She collapsed, prompting Aoi and Ginko to help her up.
“Hey, Otonashi!” said Aoi, while Ginko shouted, “Get yourself together Zakuro!”
The two rushed to her aid, but Maihime just stood there confused. Luckily, Zakuro was able to recover quite miraculously despite having her heart torn to pieces.
“Yes let’s find another way shall we,” she said.
“Really? Is that fine with everyone…?”
Aoi smiled bitterly. “If even the great Otonashi can’t get a good shot without Shinomiya noticing, then what other methods do we have?”
“Yeah…” The three others said in unison.
They thought about their alternatives for a while until Ginko suddenly raised her hand.
“What about this?” she said. “We go to the landfill and find all of Shino’s trash. If we try hard enough, eventually we’d grab something that’ll give us a good idea of his measurements. And you know what, it’s not even illegal! It’s the best plan, right? Right?!?!?”
“Ewww…” Maihime couldn’t even speak properly. “No way! That’s gross!”
Ginko slumped her shoulders down in shame just like Zakuro, and there was no need to explain why.
Maihime felt guilty seeing Ginko collapse so suddenly, even if she was only partly aware of the situation. “Sorry…” she said softly. “I’m being so selfish…”
Seeing her so down was cute enough to raise Ginko and Zakuro’s spirits, but right now it had the opposite effect. It only made them more depressed that they couldn’t think of something.”
“Yeah, you’re right…”. Ginko forced a smile. “There’s no guarantee… Let’s think of another way…”
Once again they stood silently trying to think of something. Was there even a way to get his measurements without him noticing? He wasn’t just some regular student as well
— his senses were inhumanly sharp, and he exhibited no openings no matter what he was doing. At least, that was true when he was conscious…

“Ah!” Zakuro’s eyes lit up.
“Hm? Did you think of something?” asked Maihime. Her, Ginko, and Aoi all turned to her.
Zakuro averted her eyes away
— She always had trouble maintaining eye contact. Instead, she used her panda as a proxy for herself.
“I just thought of something let’s try it out,” she finally said.
The three continued to stare at her in anticipation.
—
About ten hours later, the four gathered in front of Shino’s room. It was far past anyone’s bedtime at
around two in the morning, so the surrounding area was completely silent. Most of the lights around them had long been turned off.
“A-Are we doing the right thing?” Maihime whispered to the crew.
As one might have expected, they were sneaking into Shino’s room as part of Zakuro’s plan. By catching Shino when he was sleeping, they could get accurate measurements of his body. The only catch was that they had to break some rules to pull this off, which made it seem a bit sketchy.
“Well, it’s hard to say if we’re right or wrong in doing this,” Aoi whispered back with a faint smile.
Her words were quickly interrupted by the soft lock picking noises coming from the front door. Both Zakuro and Ginko were trying their hand at it.
“There’s no other choice if we need the measurements its best to do it when he’s sleeping,” said Zakuro.
“Yeah, and this makes you two even,” added Ginko.
“Makes us even…? What do you mean?”
“Ah, nothing. Just a slip of my tongue. Sorry.”
“Don’t mind it too much Maihime she was just making a complicated joke in any case the door’s open,” said Zakuro, quickly trying to change the subject.
Maihime was too focused on sneaking in to question it any further. “Sorry, Shino,” she whispered once she was inside. “This is all for your sake…”
She snuck in as quietly as she could with Ginko and Zakuro doing the same behind her.
“Hmm, I wonder where Shino is…” she asked herself.
Ginko pointed at the bed and whispered, “I think he’s over there.”
Even though they couldn’t see Shino, they could see his silhouette under his blanket. It would be troublesome if he was still awake, but luckily he seemed to be asleep. Maihime silently took out a measuring tape and approached the bed.
After giving a slight nod to Ginko and Zakuro, the two of them slowly took off the blanket, but once they did—
“Huh?” Maihime’s eyes widened one she saw what was under the blanket. It wasn’t Shino, but rather pillows stacked in the shape of a person.
However, she didn’t have time to completely process what she just saw. In the next instance, Shino came flying down from above and pinned her down

on the floor. Before she knew what was going on, he had already readied a blade next to her throat.
“Don’t move. Who are you?” he asked.
The events happened so fast Maihime couldn’t help but scream out just as the room lights flashed on. Finally, she was able to see who had ambushed her.
“S-Shino?”
“Huh? Tenkawa?” Shino eyed her suspiciously. He let her go, not because he was relieved to see that it was her, but because he understood that she could easily overpower him if she wanted to. “Otonashi, Sajihara, and Yaegaki too… What are you all doing here?”
“Umm… Umm…” Maihime couldn’t speak properly since she was too busy trying to avoid looking Shino in the eyes. But then she remembered that she was holding her measuring tape, so she quickly hid it behind her back.
That did not go unnoticed by Shino. “Hmm? What are you hiding?” he asked.
“N-Nothing a-at all!”
Zakuro tried to help out by changing the topic as well. “In any case what is this Shino?” she said, pointing at the pillows on his bed.
“What is that? I always have them laid out like that in case of an attack, so…”Shino said. He was surprised why they made such a big deal out of it.
“An attack?” Aoi asked. “Do you actually get attacked?”
“I just did, didn’t I?”
“Oh.”
The three couldn’t respond to that, but Ginko realized that staying silent would be the same as admitting their guilt. So, with sweat dripping down her cheek, she tried to throw out an excuse.
“W-Well, actually we were, you know… the old Kanagawa tradition called a Divine Awakening! We do it for all recently joined members of the student council!”
“Divine Awakening?”
“Indeed. As Divine Pillars we must always be on guard. We must ensure that you are always on your guard, so we do these mock attacks to keep you on your toes! We’re all prepared! Take Zakuro, for example, who has her panda bomby things next to her bed at all times.”
“No I don’t what are you talking about why would you set up to bomb your own bed…”
“You do, right?!?!!?”
“Oh yeah sorry I forgot I do have those around.”
Shino still eyed them suspiciously as they all tried to force a smile. However, that all changed a few seconds later when he confidently nodded.
“I see, so that’s why…”
“Wow you believe that?” Maihime blurted out in surprise. She quickly covered her mouth to prevent any more of these outbursts.
“What?”

“A-Ah, nothing…”
Shino eyed her once again, but chose to ignore it in the end. “Whatever,” he said, “So, how’d I do?”
“Uhh… What?”
“Surely you must have some sort of grading scale for doing these things… Did I meet your expectations?”
“A-Ah, yes! You passed! With full points!”
“Good to know.” Shino may have said that calmly and without any facial expressions, but there was a hint of pride in his voice. “Then everything’s done here, right?” he continued, waving them all away. “You all should get some sleep. You know what they all say
— if you can sleep, sleep. It’s our duty as soldiers.”
“Y-Yeah sure, good night, Shino,” said Maihime. She walked out in an awkward fashion, making sure that the measuring tape was hidden from Shino’s view.
They all breathed a sigh of relief once they were all out. It was hard to tell if they even breathed on the way out.
“Wow, what a guy…” said Aoi.
“Yeah…” nodded Ginko. “I thought that he might notice us halfway through, but there’s no way I could have imagined *that*…”
“It’ll be hard to get any measurements with him like that perhaps we should just give up…”
They all slumped down in despair. Maihime wasn’t feeling too optimistic, either.
“Maybe we should just give up on the surprise, and just tell him what we were gonna do?”
Ginko put her hand out. “Wait a second,” she said. “There’s still one more thing to try.”
“There is?”
—
The next morning, Shino was heading to town with his specialized weapon in hand. He tried all day yesterday to try to get used to it to no avail, so he decided to go town to see if he could make some of his own adjustments to it.
A typical special sword contained special metals that could flow with people’s [World] and cartridges that could store that power. In fact, Shino’s temporary sword currently had two of those cone-shaped cartridges as a hilt.
Physically speaking it was possible to omit the cartridges, but it would shorten the amount of time people could bring out their [World]. After all, they were like battery packs that kept the power flowing.
It was near impossible to change the overall composition of the sword, but little things like the handle thickness or the hilt size were modifiable. Since this was a mass-produced weapon, fine tuning it made it more efficient and precise.

There was a junk store near one of the factories that sold unused parts off the assembly line, and Shino made sure to memorize the way to it before he left. Like always, he was on guard against his surroundings. As long as he was in the city, he would always be considered deep within enemy territory.

As he walked, Shino thought about last night's surprise attack— "Divine Awakening," they called it. He had actually been through something similar before in the Administration Bureau, so the intended lessons of that awakening had already been carved in him.

Luckily, he had already taken care of all the things he didn't want Maihime to see. There was no way he was making that mistake again. However, right now he was thinking about a much more serious problem.

Shino was a guy who was always thinking of ways to protect himself when he slept. He always put a dummy on his bed to tank the sneak attacks, but what if he had forgotten to? How would yesterday have played out then? Perhaps they would have tied him up and given him a stern warning or some sort of penalty.

But was that all there was to it? He definitely saw Maihime hide something behind her back. He couldn't get a good look at it, but it was something like a string.

"A string… hmm… during a sneak attack at night," he said to himself. Yes, he was certain there was only one thing that would be used for. "Choking me to death, huh…"

Choking someone to death was the most effective method of killing an unsuspecting target. It left no trace, so it could even be made to feign suicide. With Maihime's superhuman strength, he would be a dead man the moment Maihime could wrap the string around his neck. With all that in mind, last night they were clearly prepared to do some damage.

If it was all just a mock attack, why would they go that far? Shino just couldn't stop wondering why. If they were that serious about being on guard, why was Maihime's security so lax? There were some who snuck pictures of her all the time, some who went through her trash, and some who even placed hidden cameras and microphones in her room.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Maihime was aware of all this and was just enjoying the attention, but Shino found that thought far too wild.

No. Shino shook his head. If Shino really had been sleeping in his bed last night, he very well could have been strangled to death. His body could have been hung from the ceiling to make others think he killed himself.

Perhaps he was overthinking things, but if the others found out Shino's true purpose…

"SHINO! TAKE THIS!!"

He suddenly heard a voice behind him and instantly jumped back and turned around, taking a low stance with his hand tightly gripped on his sword.

It was Ginko. She had thrown a ball in Shino's direction, but he sidestepped it
— he wasn't the type of person to get hit by such a weak attack. However, as he did, Shino saw the shadows of more and more balls that were about to drop on him. Whoever was dropping them from above must have predicted his movements.

"Damn it." It was easy to dodge Ginko's one and only ball, but there were too many this time. Clearly it was going to be difficult to dodge all of them. Despite that, Shino wasn't worried. With a quick look upwards he swung out his katana, neatly slicing all the balls down the middle.

"Wha—"

The balls he cut in two were actually filled with water so it all came pouring down on him. They turned out to be water balloons in the end
— now there really was no avoiding that. With a big splash, all the water soaked Shino from head to toe.

The splash was so loud that the surrounding people just stared on in horror.

"What's going on?" he asked himself. He wiped the water away from his eyes so he could get a closer look around. As he did, Ginko came running at him.

"A-Ah, Shino!" she shouted. She tried to sound sincere but her acting skills were at an all time low. "Sorry! I didn't expect that to happen!"

Maihime, Zakuro, and Aoi also popped out from the building.

"I'm sorry Shino it seemed you were just caught up in our water balloon fight," Zakuro said.

"Water balloon fight?"

"Exactly how it sounds. Two teams fight each other with water balloons," Ginko continued. "But we *didn't* expect you to be here, Shino."

Shino glared at her. "I clearly saw you throwing one at me, though…"

"That wasn't on purpose! It was just an unfortunate accident…"

"I also saw you throw one at me while saying, 'TAKE THIS!'"

"Y-You just misheard me!"

"Yeah!" Maihime interrupted before Shino could question Ginko any further. "But more importantly, you'll catch a cold like that!"

"Exactly. You better change," Aoi added on.

Shino didn't know what they were up to, but they were right. Even though his body wasn't this fragile and weak, it was better not to take any changes. A sudden sickness could cause him to miss an important battle.

"I guess so. I'll be heading back to my room, then," he said.

He turned to walk back only to be stopped by Maihime quickly pulling him on the sleeve.

"T-That's no good!" she said. "Your dorm is so far away! You'll definitely catch it by then!"

"Err… I can manage fine."

The other Pillars wouldn't hear any more of it. They closed in on him like tigers closing in on their prey.

“As Maihime said! Why don’t you take better care of your body!” shouted Ginko.
Aoi nodded. “Yeah I agree. I do know a good place for you to change…”
“Wow Aoi what a coincidence where might this place be?” asked Zakuro.
“Wouldn’t Maihime’s dorm be a good place? It’s still being fixed up right now so no one’s using it, but apparently there’s a nice bathhouse you could use today!”
“*Wow~* As an apology we’ll give you some spare clothes, so just go in and enjoy yourself, Shino!”
They spoke in such rapid succession that Shino could barely get a response out.
“Tenkawa’s dorm isn’t that far from mine, though… And why is a dorm that’s currently doing renovations suddenly have an open bathhouse?”
“Yeah, but that small distance is the difference between life and death!”
“Exactly! It’s also not that odd!” nodded Aoi. “Normally we’d have to reserve that bath, but since everyone had to move out it’s the perfect time to go!”
“That’s not what I meant…”
“It’s all good!” Maihime shouted. “Let’s go, Shino! If we continue bickering like this you’ll also catch a cold!”
She forcibly grabbed Shino’s hand and led him along. The other Pillars moved close to him as well to prevent him from wandering away.
“Uhhh… what are you all doing?”
They surrounded him so closely he felt like a VIP, even though their formation was lacking in structure. Despite that, Shino knew that he was being surrounded by the strongest fighters in the city, so escaping this would be tough.
He felt sick to his stomach. He didn’t know what they were up to, but if they wanted to kill him back then, all they had to do was to just fill up those balloons with acid or poison and he would be finished. However, since they didn’t do that, he thought that maybe they wanted to kill him in a more secluded place.
“No way…” he whispered to himself. Obviously they didn’t want to just snatch him away in the open, so the alternative was to—
Another shiver went down his back as he remembered what Aoi said just now. An empty bath house… A place where everyone had to move out… That would be the perfect place to finish him off. If he got trapped in there, he could scream all he wanted and no one would hear him. They could even cut him up and just wash his blood away with all the water.
Yes, indeed. They could cut him up until they extracted all the information they needed out of him. Torture was, after all, the best way of getting this information.
Despite that, even if he knew what was going on, Maihime still had him by the arm. By the time he gathered up all his thoughts, he had already arrived at his final destination.

Maihime’s old dormitory used to be grand and majestic, but now it was surrounded by rubble and caution tapes. There was also a huge unpatched hole right where her room used to be.
“Here, come here!” said Maihime, leading Shino right into the bathhouse.
Shino knew that escaping would get a hundred times more difficult the moment he stepped in the building, but Maihime’s grip strength was so powerful he couldn’t break away even if he tried.
It wasn’t long before he was forcibly dragged right up to the changing room.
“Damn…” Shino clenched his teeth
— he had no choice but to endure. If push came to shove, he was ready to give up an arm if it meant escaping from this place. No matter what they were going to do, he vowed not to tell them anything, but the existence of truth serum-like drugs and the possibility of one of them having a truth seeking [World] scared him a bit. In that case, there would be no outs.
“Alright, Shino. We prepared a spare set of clothes for you, so go enjoy yourself!” said Maihime. She finally let go of his hand and opened the door to the changing room for him.
Shino was taken aback. He was so sure that the room would be lined up with torture devices and questionable drugs, but the room seemed perfectly normal. The bath beyond was even an open bath, so he could easily escape anytime he wanted to.
“You guys aren’t gonna enter?”
Maihime shook her head violently. “Huh? Of course not!”
Shino didn’t know what to think. They were all giving him some awkward smiles, and didn’t seem to want to torture him… Perhaps they really were having a random water balloon fight in the middle of the city, and perhaps they really were sincere about their apology.
“Alright then, here I go…” said Shino. He realized he might as well do as they said and entered the changing room.
—
Maihime waited a few seconds after Shino left before giving a nod to Ginko.
“We good?” she asked.
“Yeah, I heard the door open inside. He probably already entered the bathhouse.”
“Alright, lets grab his clothes then,” signaled Maihime.
Of course, they weren’t just having fun with a water balloon fight. By purposefully getting Shino wet, they could get him to change and thus have access to his clothes, which was a good indication of his height and arm size After all, they had concluded that Shino was far too wary to be snuck up on, so this was their last chance to get any semblance of data on him.
“Remember let’s be careful,” Zakuro added on.
“Yeah…” said Aoi. “After what happened yesterday I wouldn’t be surprised if he was just pretending to go into the bathhouse while actually hiding somewhere in here.”

Maihime gulped in fear because she knew Aoi was right. Shino was certainly the type of person to do that, but that's exactly the reason why they chose this place. As Shino had mentioned earlier, this bathhouse wasn't too far from his dorm. However, going to his dorm was a bit risky in the one in a million chance that they were caught rummaging through his stuff, since there would be no believable excuse to come back from that. On the other hand, since this was a public bathhouse, they had the excuse of just wanting to go in as well. Yes, they did mentioned they weren't going to enter earlier, but that's beside the point. They even cleverly made the bathhouse a mixed gender one for this very purpose.
"Let's do this!" said Maihime.
They silently entered the changing room. This was Kanagawa's biggest dorm, so as expected, the bathhouse and its respective changing rooms were big as well. They were numerous baskets lined up against the wall. On the left side were roughly around the same amount of sinks.
Each of the dorm rooms had their own bathrooms, but Maihime always used the ones here. It was always nice to bond with other students here, and a wider bath just felt better. She couldn't wait to move back into this dorm to come here once again on a regular basis.
Now wasn't the time to think that, though. Maihime quietly took a look around the room when she heard Shino place something down in the bathhouse. It seemed he really did enter.
"Perfect," said Maihime. She started searching for Shino's basket along with the others…
But they couldn't find it. Shino definitely came in here, but his clothes were nowhere to be found.
"W-What's the meaning of this?" asked Ginko.
"Shino couldn't have entered the bathhouse with his clothes on right?"
"No, look at that!" Aoi said, pointing to the shelf nearest to the bath.
"Oh I see… did he take the basket with him inside?"
"Yeah," nodded Ginko. "He probably used the basket we provided him with to hold all his clothes and brought it in!"
"Wow…"said Maihime. She didn't want to believe that Shino was that cautious, but there were no other possibilities. "Then this way is no good, huh… And here I thought we could at least do this…"
Maihime sighed, causing Ginko and Zakuro to give her a encouraging slap on the back.
"Don't give up yet," said Ginko, while Zakuro immediately followed up with, "There's still a way left."
"There is?" Maihime stared blankly at them. "But how do we get the basket now that it's inside?"
Ginko gave a smirk, while Zakuro just looked away in shame.
"Sure it's inside, but I'm sure even Shino wouldn't bring it near the baths. He wouldn't want to get it wet, right?"

“So while Shino is enjoying the baths his basket wouldn’t be anywhere near him.”
“Oh, I see!” said Aoi. “It won’t take that long to get his measurements from his clothes, so while he’s in the actual baths we have an opportunity to do it.”
“Yup,” nodded Ginko. “It should be possible. Should we, Maihime?”
“If there’s a chance, let’s go for it. But how do we enter the bath without Shino noticing?”
“Leave that to us both Ginko and I know everything there is to know about these baths.”
“Yeah, what Zakuro said. We know exactly the route to take so that the person in the bath wouldn’t notice.”
“Really? How though?”
Ginko and Zakuro both froze for a second. Their eyes shifted around nervously.
“N-Now’s not the time to discuss that!”
“Yeah yeah it really isn’t let’s follow Ginko quickly before Shino’s done.”
Maihime thought they were acting strange, but they were right. Now wasn’t the time for such trivial matters.
“Alright, please show us the way,” she said with a new resolve.
The two breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.
“Let’s go,” said Ginko.
“Yeah quickly there is no time.”
“W-Wait for me!” said Aoi, quickly chasing after them.
They made their way down the hall before climbing out of a window. They walked around the perimeter alongside a wall until reaching an unmarked spot.
“This is it,” said Ginko. She pulled the wall towards her, revealing a small crawlspace just big enough for a person to fit through.
“Wow…” Maihime said unknowingly. She never expected to get in this way. Clearly this was possible because of all the reconstruction, but she wondered once again why they knew this hole was here. She thought about it for a few seconds, but ultimately decided to focus on the main objective.
“The bath is beyond this point, so proceed with caution.”
“Okay…” nodded Maihime, and they entered.
There were a lot of bushes on the other side of the wall, so all they had to do was keep a low profile to enter without being seen. Of course, Maihime still felt weirded out by the whole thing, even more so when she could see the steam coming from the baths. She could even see Shino in one of the stone bathtubs when she took a closer look.
Luckily, his basket and sword were lined up off to the side just as they had anticipated.
“There it is!” whispered Maihime. She was relieved that Shino didn’t actually bring the basket into the bathtub. It was even close to where they were hiding.

With a nod to each other, they crawled up to the basket. Maihime took one last look to make sure Shino wasn't looking in her direction before slowly reaching out through the bush and grabbing his clothes.
At that moment, Shino's eyes lit up. He definitely felt something and started looking around.
That caused Maihime to freeze in fear with Shino's uniform still in hand.
"Oh no!" she thought to herself. If she was caught here, there would be no excuses to get out of it. She would be branded as a stalker for the rest of her life and would have to live with the humiliation.
The thought of that scared her so much she prayed for him not to notice. She even tried her hardest to slow her heartbeat down in fear that Shino might somehow hear it. He probably couldn't, but she never knew when it came to Shino.
After a while he just relaxed back into the bath without doing anything.
"N-Nice…" said Maihime.
"Maihime, let's proceed."
"Oh, right."
It was too early to be relieved. There was still work to do. The four crawled to a rocky wall and took out Shino's clothes under its shadow, when Aoi the lookout noticed something.
"Hey, Shinomiya's coming out
!" she said, just as Maihime was about to measure his clothes.
Just on cue they heard splashing sounds coming from within. There was no doubt about it— he was done with his bath.
"Ugh!" Maihime held her breath. It would be game over if Shino noticed his clothes were missing, especially since she wasn't done yet. Putting it back, though, was obviously not an option.
At that moment, there was strange scratching sounds coming from Shino's side of the rocks.
"Hmm?" murmured Shino.
Maihime could hear Shino moving further and further away from her, so she used that time to figure out what was going on. Since Zakuro and Ginko were gone, she knew that they were buying time for her from the other side. Once they saw that Shino was about to leave, they made a last ditch effort to keep him away until Maihime was done with her stuff.
"Thank, Ginko, Zakuro!" said Maihime as she teared up a little bit.
But it seemed all for naught as Shino ignored the noise and turned straight back in Maihime's direction. Seeing this, she quickly rushed above the rock she was hiding under and prepared to throw Shino's clothes back into the basket—
"W-Wha…?" Maihime suddenly slipped on the rock and fell straight into the water below. After being submerged in the water for a few seconds, she got up and coughed all the water out of her lungs. She had difficulty getting up with her clothes completely soaked, but that was the least of her troubles.
"What? Why are you here, Tenkawa?" asked Shino from above her.

Maihime shuddered. “U-Umm… This is…. Uhh…” she said, trying really hard to think of an excuse to say, but nothing prepared her for what was right in front of her. Yes, it was Shino standing before her, but she would have never imagined Shino to be like this. His slightly long hair stuck to his slender shoulders, and his body looked surprisingly soft, especially around the breast area.
Seeing this, Maihime thought of only one thing:
Shino’s a girl.

Chapter 3: A Date Between Two Girls

Shino stood silently at a loss of words in the midst of the ever so luxurious dormitory bathhouses. Maihime, who had just fallen down to the water right in front of him, stared back at him in shock.

Shino slowly looked down at his own body. He had the scars of battle along with very visible muscles packed around his core, but she realized her cover was blown when she could see her own breasts.

There was no hiding it now— Shino was in fact, a girl. One boy and one girl infiltrating Kanagawa would lead to better results, so she and her partner Hotaru decided to do it. Naturally, since Shino was taller and more suited for boy’s clothes, they decided she would be the one to swap genders.

Yet that in itself was a double-edged sword. The consequences of someone finding that out were huge, even worse if that person was their target.

Shino knew this, so she had to assess the situation— Maihime was completely wet and dripping water everywhere. What was more intriguing was that she was holding onto Shino’s uniform. Shino took another look at her own basket to make sure and then everything began to form a picture in her mind.

There were two reasons why Shino brought the basket in with her. First, she wanted to quickly get her clothes on and bail if it ever came down to it. Second and more importantly, she feared that Maihime and the others might sneak some sort of wire into her clothes so they could listen in on her anytime they wanted.

It seemed that her worries were right on the mark. Maihime couldn’t find Shino’s clothes in the changing room, so she had to resort to these tactics. Of course, there was also the possibility of Maihime stealing her clothes so she wouldn’t be able to escape, but that in itself was naive. Shino would have no problem running out of there naked if it came down to it. After all, letting embarrassment cloud one’s judgement was the ultimate mark of a fool.

In any case, it wasn’t a good situation for Shino right now. The fact that Maihime and crew used such a roundabout method meant that they didn’t know what she was up to. However, it did mean that had their doubts about her. Even worse, when they saw that Shino was pretending to be a boy, their doubts would further—

“Achoo!”

Maihime’s sudden sneeze put a stop to Shino’s thoughts. Perhaps she caught a cold after getting soaked in the water.

Soon, others came running from the shadows of the rocks, yelling out to Maihime.

“Tenkaawa!”

“Maihime!”
“Are you okay?”
It was Aoi, Ginko, and Zakuro coming from the bushes off to the side. As Shino had expected, they served as the lookout for this whole operation.
“I’m okay, but at this rate I’m gonna catch a cold,” she said, “but hold on a second, Shino.“
She neatly folded up Shino’s uniform and headed back to the changing room, dragging her coat along the water.
After a while, Maihime popped back out completely naked.
“Thanks for waiting!” she said, but the others probably couldn’t register her words. They were just in awe and overwhelmed that Maihime would take off her clothes and come back to the baths. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity for them.
She leapt at the baths, but suddenly went, “Oops!” and got out and took a shower first. Even though she already plunged once into the water, her good manners kept her from breaking the rules. With her clothes neatly folded up and her shoes placed off to the side, she was raised right as a child.



“Nice, it’s warm!” she said as she dipped into the water.
It took a while, but the others finally composed themselves and ran up to her.
“Maihime, what are you doing?” asked Ginko.
“Exactly why did you suddenly take off all your clothes isn’t Shino here?”
“I guess,” she replied, “but at that rate I would get super cold. Besides, Shino’s a girl, so it’s fine… Why don’t you three come in too?”
“…………………..”
Without saying a word, the three looked at each other, quickly ran to the changing room, and came out completely naked as well.
It wasn’t long before the four were in the baths Shino had just been in, but there was an air of awkwardness around everybody. They couldn’t help but just stare at Shino’s body silently. Shino wasn’t embarrassed per say, but she certainly didn’t feel comfortable, so she slowly submerged herself back in the water.
Once they realized they were starting to much, the four quickly averted their gaze.
“Ummm, Shino?” Maihime asked timidly.
“What is it?”
“You’re a girl… right?”
“I am.”
Shino knew there were no excuses to get her out of this sticky situation, so her best bet was to be frank with everyone.
But Maihime wasn’t convinced. “Ummm, can I make sure?” she asked again.
“Go for it.”
Maihime slowly moved closer to Shino. With a nervous gulp, she reached out her hand to Shino’s breasts.
“Wow… They’re real…” she said excitedly, feeling around.
That seemed to prompt the others to confirm for themselves as well. Zakuro went all over feeling her skin, Ginko took in her scent, and Aoi just hesitantly felt her fingers.
Shino let this go on for a while before brushing them off.
“Okay, we’re good here, right?”
Maihime drew her hand back. “Y-Yeah! Sorry.”
Shino silently breathed a sigh of relief. Honestly, she didn’t feel comfortable after that
— Not because of the embarrassment of having her breasts touched, but because Maihime was just inches away from crushing her heart. Given her suspicions of Shino, it wouldn’t even be too far fetched for her to do so right there and then.
“Wow, you’re really as girl…” whispered Maihime.
“So what’s going on, here?” snapped Shino.
“Umm…. something is…”
“Huh?” Shino threw her a dirty a look. “What were you all doing?”

“S-Something….” said Maihime, clearly shaken up by the question. “I wanted to uhh… wash my back.”
“With my uniform?”
“Oh, I… I got it mixed up with a towel…”
Shino narrowed his eyes hearing such an obvious lie, but she knew it was futile to push on. After all, the conversation could easily change to why Shino was pretending to be a guy. Ultimately, she nodded, pretending like she understood.
“I see…”
Maihime and the others couldn’t believe their ears. “You believe that?!?” they all thought to themselves.
“Something wrong?”
“N-No, nothing… So, why were you wearing a guy’s uniform?”
She knew it was coming, but she still didn’t know how to answer to that, especially since the four were so eager to hear her response. If she made a mistake with the response, her life would be forfeit. There was no way she could let them know the true reason why she pretended to be a guy. Her excuse had to be all about her.
“Well, you see…” she explained after thinking about it. “I come from a long line of samurais. Each generation passed down its secret arts to one person, but unfortunately my father couldn’t get a son to pass these arts to, so I was always raised as a boy.”
It was true that Shino was part of a long line of samurais, but she couldn’t remember one instance where she was raised as a boy. Besides, her father wasn’t some dojo master— he worked for the government.
Spitting out these lies made Shino a bit dizzy. She never really read any manga or short stories that she could draw inspiration from to make her story more believable. She just braced herself for the inevitable “what the hell are you talking about?” that was about to come her way.
But, today was her lucky day.
“I see, so that was it!”
“That’s why you’re dressed as a boy…”
“Shino, you’ve had it rough, huh?”
There wasn’t a single person who doubted her story. Well, maybe not Aoi since she made a bit of a troubled face. The other three believed her completely. The fact that everything worked so smoothly made Shino feel more confident.
Yet she couldn’t let her guard down. There was no turning back now. She had to keep her story straight, especially in front of them from now on.
“But now that I think about it that was way before the war ever happened right?” asked Zakuro. “You don’t have to follow it now…”
“I guess so,” replied Shino. “Maybe I just feel embarrassed since I’ve never worn a skirt, so I’ll like to keep it that way if I can. Besides, the Administration Bureau was kind enough to get me a boy’s uniform.”
Of

course, that wasn't entirely the truth. Shino had worn a skirt before (albeit before the war), and she just requested clothes t
hat were easy to fight in. But it was true she wasn't used to wearing one.
Hearing this, Maihime couldn't help but blurt out, "That's terrible!" with a pout.
"What is?"
"Making you do boy stuff, even though you're a girl…"
"It didn't bother me too much," replied Shino. "Besides—"
"Terrible indeed!" interrupted Aoi. "Even at this age you haven't enjoyed a lot of the things we have! It's time for you to do a 180 and get you some new clothes!"
She gave Ginko and Zakuro a nod and immediately they understood what she was up to.
"I agree with Aoi completely Shino there are a lot of different outfits that you need to try after this I'm free so let's do this."
"Wow Zakuro, that sounds amazing!" exclaimed Ginko. "We also have to get you new girl uniforms! And for that, we just need your *measurements*!"
Maihime finally understood what was going on and joined in the fray. "Ah, I see, right! After you finish your bath, let's go shopping! I'll pick out some good clothes for you!"
"Wait a second, I'm—"
Shino tried to get a few words out, but no one else was listening to him any more.
—
It wasn't long before Shino headed to downtown Kanagawa with Maihime and the other Divine Pillars. Shino's clothes were still wet from the incident earlier, so she wore a spare jersey on top. She pleaded so many times that this trip wasn't necessary, but Maihime wouldn't hear another word from her.
"It's okay!" Maihime would say, pounding her chest triumphantly. "Leave it to us!"
Maihime's clothes were also wet, but she wasn't wearing a jersey on top like Shino was. Instead, she was wearing the clothes she had bought during their date. Zakuro was kind enough to rush to her room to grab it for her.
The four were so close to Shino that they looked like her bodyguards protecting her walk to town. Of course, the whole thing itself was quite a spectacle. Not only were the four Pillars gathered in one spot, the city head was also with them! The people around them couldn't help wondering why they were all gathered together like that.
As an infiltrating agent, Shino didn't feel good about drawing this much attention, even though by now even her target knew who she was, so most rules were already thrown out the window.
After a lot of squirming around, she finally made it to the row of shops downtown. Most clothe shops had mannequins on display modelling their

flashy products. Even the shop that Maihime and Shino visited together back then was on this street.
“Alright, this is a good place to start off!” said Maihime, walking into one of the shops.
The shop owner immediately noticed their presence and shouted, “Oh my god!” in surprise, but no one paid any attention back.
“Yup, you need a skirt…” contemplated Maihime. “Hmm… what clothes here would suit you…?”
“I’m not used to wearing any skirts, so maybe something not too short, like —”
“No, no, no! We must get you the perfect clothes regardless of what they are!”
“Exactly, hmm… But before that we need to do something…” agreed Zakuro.
Maihime understood exactly with a nod and brought out a tape measure from her pocket. She had a sharp look in her eyes, sharp enough to kill, and was ready to finally do this.
“We have to get your measurements first, Shino,” she said. “Can you take off your clothes in that changing room over there?”
Aoi smiled bittery, but Zakuro and Ginko were nodding in anticipation. Shino felt this and took a step back unconsciously. For some reason, she had a bad feeling about this.
“Wait a second,” she said. “We don’t need to have things specially made, so there’s no need to measure. Besides, even if we need to measure, shouldn’t the shop do that instead? There’s no—”
“Alright! Let’s do this!” interrupted Ginko.
“Indeed the faster we do this the better,” agreed Zakuro.
Before Shino even finished her sentence, the two were dragging her by her arms right into the changing room. The changing room itself was surprisingly large. It was probably made to do this sort of thing, as it had more than enough room for multiple people.
“Come, Shino!”
“Yeah, just do as we say!”
“No need to be embarassed weren’t we just in the baths together?”
Maihime, Ginko, and Zakuro pulled no stops. Only Aoi seemed a bit apologetic as she said, “Sorry about this, Shino…”
“Ughh….” Shino sighed. They sounded like villains luring her in, not to mention she was highly against letting them gather data on her body. Even so, if she resisted, they would surely use force. She knew there was no other choice but to do as they said.
She slowly took off her jersey, and the others turned beet red.
“Uhh….”
“I feel like we’re doing something wrong here….”
Shino narrowed her eyes. “What are you all saying?”
“N-Nothing, it’s just a joke…”

After taking off her jersey, Shino was only left in her underwear. Her underwear, however, wasn't like any other girl's. She had wrapped her chest area with a cloth and was wearing boxers, all remnants from when she disguised herself as a boy.
"Huh? You aren't wearing a bra?" Maihime shouted out, surprised.
"Maihime's right. And why are you wrapping a cloth around your boobs?!" said Ginko. "It's true they aren't very big, but that's not good for them!"
"Yeah at this rate they aren't gonna look too good," said Zakuro.
"Why do you guys care?"
"Because we do!" shouted Ginko. "We better get you some proper underwear alongside the clothes as well, which means more measurements!"
"Exactly!" nodded Maihime. She eagerly started to use the measuring tape on Shino. "I'll go bit by bit… So let's start with your height… Hmm… 164 centimeters, upper arms 29.5 centimeters, forearms 23 centimeters… How about from your neck to your fingers…"
"Wait a second. These measurements aren't necessary for clothes, right? Why do you need to measure my arms?"
"Uhh… for some gloves, you know!"
"Oh, some gloves?"
"Yeah, some gloves! So we also need to get the size of your fingers as well as your grip strength."
"Grip strength? For some gloves?" questioned Shino.
Maihime simply brushed off her concerns. Eventually they finished, and all of Shino's measurements were written down in Aoi's little notebook. The whole time Ginko and Zakuro couldn't help but smile creepily off to the side. They were honestly a huge distraction.
"Everything's done!" said Maihime, putting her measuring tape back into her pocket. "We're gonna get you some new clothes now! Let's do this, everyone!"
"Yeah!"
They promptly left the changing room and didn't even bother closing the curtain back up. Shino locked eyes with the shop owner when she went to do it herself. The owner gave her a weird look seeing that she was in her underwear, so she quickly put her jersey back on.
She waited a while before Maihime slammed the curtain back open with her cheeks blushing and her eyes glittering.
"Here you go!" she said, handing Shino a bunch of underwear. "Try this out first! Wear the ones you prefer!"
"Wait, try this one!" said Ginko.
"No don't listen to Ginko try this one instead…"
Aoi shook her head. "Umm… Maybe we should get some plain ones?"
Maihime nodded and went back to get some more, while Shino was left with the big pile of underwear dropped on her. She was starstruck by all the choices since she had never done this before. In fact, even when she wasn't

wearing boy’s clothes, she wore a plain sports bra and boxers. She never needed anything fancy like what she was looking at now.

That’s why she was so troubled. The one Ginko recommended seemed to go with some stockings that was too erotic, and Zakuro wanted her to wear a low key goth style, which didn’t make her go crazy as well. Aoi’s was more her style, but it had an underwire bra that she didn’t really like.

Nothing seemed to fit her when she saw herself in the mirror. Looking at all the choices only made her dizzy.



“Hmm?”
Among the mountains of underwear, there was a sports bra that was similar to the one she was currently wearing. Perhaps Maihime chose it because of that very reason. She quickly unwrapped the cloth around her breasts and put it on. The size was perfect due to having her measurements done as well.
“Shino!” Just as she put it on, Maihime came back once again. If she had opened the curtain a few seconds earlier, Shino’s breasts would be completely exposed to the whole shop.
Maihime wasn’t fazed. This time, she plopped a stack of clothes next to Shino. “This time try these on!”
Hey I’ve got my hands full…”
“Once you finished changing let me know!” interrupted Maihime. “I look forward to it!”
At least she had the decency to close the curtain. Once she left, Shino finally noticed that she had also taken all the underwear she didn’t choose, her cloth wrap, and her jersey. With no other clothes to wear, she had no choice but to choose one. Unless, of course, she walked out in her underwear, which she didn’t mind too much. It just wasn’t good to draw all that attention.
Shino sighed and looked at the clothes. There were a variety of different tops to choose from, but as for the bottom there were only skirts. These were not the clothes she wanted to wear.
She had to wear one, though. She avoided the Ginko chosen leather tight skirt and the Zakuro chosen goth style, and instead opted for a plain white turtleneck and a black skirt.
Once she was done, she called out to them.
Immediately, the curtains swung open. They had to have been waiting just outside.
“Wow!!! That’s so cute, Shino!” shouted Maihime.
“You’re a real girl now!”
“I wouldn’t even recognize you from afar with those clothes.”
“Yeah, Zakuro’s right, but it does suit you!”
But that wasn’t all
— Before Shino knew it, there was a crowd around the dressing room. Maihime must have done something to draw their attention.
“Who’s that girl? She’s cute…” said a person from the crowd.
“Wait a second… isn’t that Shinomiya, the Divine Pillar?” answered another.
“Does he have a fetish for dressing up as a girl?
“It’s definitely not a he… that’s a girl.”
Of course, everyone in the city was under the impression that Shino was a guy. The shop was filled to the brim with students, and even the gossiping girls she saw the other day were there. This time they were shocked to see her in a skirt.

Shino had a bad feeling about this. This was going against her vow of keeping a low profile, even though there was nothing she could do about it right now.
“What’s wrong, Maihime?” she said, noticing that Maihime wasn’t as cheery as before.
Maihime shook her head. “N-Nothing…”
That didn’t seem to be the case. Shino could see that Maihime was staring intently at her from head to toe.
After a few seconds, Maihime finally spoke. “Umm… can you do me a favor?” she asked.
“What is it?”
“Can you try tying up your hair?”
“My hair?” asked Shino. She just realized that she left it untied after washing it in the bathhouse.
“Yeah…”
“I guess I can,” murmured Shino.
She didn’t know what Maihime’s game plan was, but there wasn’t a good reason to refuse. She tied her hair together at the end like she always did.
“No wait, not like that.”
“Then like what?”
“Like a ponytail! You tie it so low.”
Maihime grabbed a portion of her own hair to show Shino what she meant.
“Okay…” said Shino, as she did as instructed. “Is this good? Why are you even… Tenkawa?”
Shino noticed that Maihime had turned a ghastly white, so she stopped in her tracks.
“Uhh, Shino… Before the big war and stuff… have we ever met?” Maihime asked slowly.
Her odd state also drew the attention of the other Divine Pillars. “Before the war?” they asked simultaneously.
Shino raised his eyebrows. The war, also know as the Great Calamity, had already raged on for twenty nine years against the [Unknowns]. It had been a while, but Shino and the others were still young due to the cold sleep, so they slept through a number of years. To them, it had been only ten years since the war started.
“Yeah…” nodded Maihime.
Shino thought long and hard about it. For some reason, her facial expression stiffened up when she did so. Something seemed to be tugging at her brain, giving her a small headache.
“Shino? You alright?”
“Ah, yeah… Sorry, I can’t remember.”
Maihime stared back at him and replied, “I guess so, huh… Sorry, I must have gotten things mixed up. Forget I said anything.”
She sounded a bit lonely and down about the whole thing.
“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing… I just thought you were kinda similar to my old friend, but I’m wrong. Besides, your names are different.”
Maihime took a pause to compose herself, and in an instant she was back to her smiling self. “Besides,” she said, changing the topic, “you just finished changing, so let’s take a walk outside!”
She paid and stepped outside.
“Hey what’s going on?” she said to the others who were still in the store. “If you don’t come now, we’re ditching you all!”
The Pillars shuddered at the though of being left behind by Maihime. “Yes, we’re coming!” they shouted out.
But Shino wasn’t paying attention at all. Somehow, she got a small headache when she was trying to think of her past earlier. It was odd to say the least.
“Shino, let’s go!”
“I’m coming now.”
Luckily, the pain subsided after she said that. She put her shoes back on, grabbed her katana, and went out to meet her. This time, the other Pillars weren’t surrounding her and Maihime wasn’t dragging her along like before. Now would be the perfect chance to escape if she wanted to, but it wasn’t the right time. It didn’t seem like Maihime was up to anything at the moment, and even if she fled now she would still eventually have to meet her again anyway. The best course of action was not to do anything suspicious and draw attention. Plus, she didn’t have a good feeling about the odd headache she felt earlier too.
“Alright, let’s go!” smiled Maihime. She took her hand and dragged her forward.
“Wait, Tenkawa…”
“No waiting! Time to go!”
Shino followed along with a sigh and just went along with her.
“Hey Shino,” sneered Ginko from behind. “You sly dog… Why do you get to hold hands with her…”
“Yeah if you’re gonna hold her hand why don’t you go the distance and hold her closer…”
They just weren’t having it, while Aoi being the voice of reason noted that it was Maihime who initiated everything.
Shino opted to ignore them since she just didn’t want to start anything, and Maihime wasn’t even paying attention. She was too busy humming to herself and enjoying the walk downtown.
Shino did not feel comfortable as they were walking downtown, however.
“What’s wrong, Shino?” asked Maihime, still dragging her along the road.
“Yeah, need to go use the bathroom or something?” Aoi asked as well.
Shino shook her head. “No, not that.” She gently pressed down on her skirt. It felt weird for her to wear a skirt after all these years of not wearing one, especially when she was walking. She was not used to her skirt fluttering around.

She wasn't embarrassed about showing her underwear. Instead, she felt unbelievably uncomfortable having her thigh exposed. By looking at the bare skin, enemies would have a much easier time striking the vitals.
She couldn't help but awkwardly keep her legs tight together at the thought of someone slashing at her vitals. As she did, she heard a snicker from behind.
"Ginko Ginko is this what I think it is?"
"I think you're right, Zakuro."
The two snickered once again before
mischievously lifting Shino's skirt up. The move was so unexpected that Shino reacted with a gasp, which caused the people around her to look in her direction.
"… Get away from me." Shino knew what they did even without looking. She readjusted her skirt and turned to face the culprits with her hand on her katana. However, the two had already distanced themselves from her.
"Wow I did not expect that reaction from you Shino," said Zakuro.
"Sorry," Ginko added on. "It's just a prank!"
Shino wasn't having it. She took a good look at their skirts, drew her katana, and swung. A faint light illuminated the area around her.
She cut the skirts off of both Ginko and Zakuro even though they were a ways away.
"Woahh!!!" they shouted in a panic. They picked up their skirts and tried their best to cover up their underwear. Ginko was wearing some boxers, while Zakuro's had a panda print on it.
"Was that you, Shino?" asked Maihime, noticing the commotion.
"They got what they deserved."
Maihime nodded and continued to whistle. The two seemingly then disappeared for a bit, but appeared holding spare skirts they somehow had laying around.
"Sorry Shino I won't do it again," huffed Zakuro as she quickly put hers on.
"Yeah… we couldn't help it…"
They finished with an apologetic bow, which Shino accepted by putting the katana away. Maihime couldn't help but laugh from the sidelines.
"So anyways, where are we going, Tenkawa?" she asked.
"Ah, we're just gonna walk around a bit and then head back to my room," she replied. "I actually just got some good snacks. I'm sure we're all getting hungry, so we should eat that with some tea!"
"Sounds good!" shouted everyone else but Shino.
"Nice, let's go!" shouted Maihime, but before she could say anymore, she noticed an ice cream truck parked alongside the road. Like all other shops, it was also operated entirely by students. While in the old days you would have to be eighteen years old to drive, now was different. Anyone could operate a vehicle as long as he or she completed the necessary paperwork.
"Hey… how about some dessert as well?" asked Maihime.
"Sounds good!" shouted everyone once again but Shino.

“Nice, let’s go!” shouted Maihime once again. After running up to the ice cream truck, she asked, “Can I get two scoops of vanilla?”
“I also want two scoops of vanilla!” said Ginko.
“Me too!”
“Uhhh… I guess I’ll take it too…”
Shino sighed and begrudgingly walked with to them.
“Shino, what flavor do you want?” asked Maihime.
“Actually, I’m good, since—”
“Hmm, well you are a strange person… So perhaps you like strange flavors. Wasasbi? Curry?”
“How about seaweed?” suggested the shopkeeper.
Shino’s had enough. “I’ll take strawberry,” she said adamantly. She wasn’t about to eat some weird flavor of ice cream.
Maihime paid the bill and handed Shino her strawberry ice cream and soon they were off. This time, Maihime was eating her vanilla ice cream while humming.
“Eating this together with everyone makes it infinitely times better!” she said happily.
“Agreed and the weather is great today too,” added Zakuro.
“Infinitely is right, Maihime,” said Ginko.
Shino took a small bite of of her ice cream hearing them in high spirits. It was delicious as they had said and eating something cold like that felt refreshing.
Seeing that, Maihime ran up to her. “Hey, Shino, you’re the only one who got a different flavor! Can I have a bite?”
Despite asking that, she didn’t even wait for a response and leaned her head in to take a bite.
“Wow, it’s amazing! Strawberry tastes just as well as vanilla!”
She smiled, completely satisfied.
“Are you serious, Tenkawa?”
“Huh? Oh, right. A bite for a bite! Here you go!”
She handed her own cone to Shino, but Shino didn’t know how to react to that.
“What’s wrong? Don’t like vanilla?”
“No, no, I do.” A refusal now would only cause more suspicion, so she went for a bite… only to be stopped as Ginko and Zakuro went in before her and gobbled all of Maihime’s ice cream.
“What are you two doing?”
“That’s my line, Shino!” replied Ginko. “You sneaky bastard. Was that why you got a different flavor?”
“Seriously just as Ginko said we really can’t let down our guard…”
“What?” Shino wasn’t even trying to understand what they were trying to say.
“My ice cream….” sulked Maihime. She peered into the now empty cone and collapsed.

Both Ginko and Zakuro shivered.
“Sorry, Maihime… You can take mine instead. Come on, take as much as you want!”
“Please take mine too…”
Maihime backed away from their persistence. “I don’t think I can eat both of yours… Wait, why’re you two’s eyes so scary?”
Shino sighed. As usual, they were a rowdy bunch.
“Here, you can have mine,” she said, handing hers to Maihime. “The wind’s getting stronger, so let’s get going.”
“Okay thanks, Shino!” said Maihime. She had the biggest grin on her face.
On the other hand, the two in question had the biggest scowls on their faces, but Shino paid them no mind.
They continued to walk until they weren’t in downtown anymore. After going through a park, they finally arrived at Maihime’s temporary room deep inside the fifth floor of another dorm.
“Come in, come in!” she said after unlocking the door.
“Absolutely!”
“Ah I’m back…”
“It feels like home!”
Ginko, Zakuro, and Aoi all said their respective thanks and entered.
“Oh yeah, you haven’t seen my room yet right, Shino? Welcome!”
“Yeah,” muttered Shino.
Maihime’s living room area was even bigger than Shino’s, but somehow it felt much more cramped. Well, perhaps it was because there were currently five people in it, or the fact that it was full of Maihime’s cute stuffed animals and little accessories. It was hard to even walk around without stepping on something.
“I’ll make some tea, so just sit tight!” said Maihime, heading off to the kitchen.
Aoi was the only one who listened to her and sat down. Zakuro couldn’t waste this opportunity and snapped a few photos around her room, while Ginko went on an uncontrollable sniffing spree.
What a dreadful sight. Shino looked away to avoid seeing them any more. As she did, she caught a picture of a young Maihime along with two other girls on the shelf. Maihime couldn’t have been more than ten years old when that picture was taken.
“This is Tenkawa, huh…” Because she was so young, she looked almost unrecognizable, though Shino noticed her classic white hair and pure skin that she still had to this day. The picture must have been taken before the war.
Upon a closer look, Shino noticed something strange
— something that took her breath away. She recognized the person to her left.
“What’s wrong, Shino?” asked Maihime, just as she returned with some tea and snacks.

Instantly, Zakuro stopped taking pictures and Ginko stood back up. Maihime put everything on the table and took a peek at what Shino was holding.
“Oh that!” she said. “That’s an old picture of me. The other two girls are…”
“Hotaru,” interrupted Shino.
Maihime couldn’t believe her ears. “Wait, what did you say?!?”
Indeed, the girl was none other than Shino’s partner and fellow agent of the Adminsitration Bureau, Rindou Hotaru.
“How did you know her name? Wait, I mentioned her before, didn’t I? But yeah, that girl’s name is Hotaru, my friend.”
“What in the world…” pondered Shino. Maihime had uttered the name Hotaru before, but when Shino asked Hotaru about it, Hotaru claimed she knew nothing of it. Yet despite all that, the girl in the photo was undoubtedly the Hotaru that she knew.
“I know right? She kinda looks like you, but she’s definitely more cheery!”
“Say what?” Shino said, pointing at Hotaru. “She looks like me?”
Maihime shook her head. “No, no… That’s not Hotaru. That’s Itou Marika! Hotaru is the other girl, here.”
Shino took another look at the picture. What in the world was going on? She did kind of look like herself, though…
—
Shino was on her way home from Maihime’s room. The sun had long set, so there weren’t as many students around. On her left hand was her katana, while on her right was her yet to dry clothes.
She was so deep in thought that she tripped over a crack in the sidewalk and almost fell. She knew she wasn’t in a good mental state, so she took a deep breath to compose herself. She knew she was letting her guard down. Any surprise attack she took on now would have double the effectiveness.
Of course, her mind was still thinking about what Maihime had said earlier today. Maihime knew a girl called “Marika” who looked like Hotaru. Yet at the same time, she also knew a girl called “Hotaru” who looked like Shino. Shino could say for certain that she never took such a photo with her, so this “Hotaru” girl had to be another person who coincidentally shared the same facial features as her. There was something else, too. When Shino heard the name Hotaru, she experienced the same headache she had in the clothing shop. Thanks to that, the snacks and tea that Maihime had graciously prepared tasted like sand.
“Damn it,” she murmured to herself. She felt something unpleasant, almost like there was something crawling in her head.
A few moments later, she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks. She was able to make out a shadow on the sidewalk, and just as she was about to get a closer look, the person walked up to the light.
“Hotaru…” Shino muttered. Calling out her name actually made Shino’s heart skip a beat, and just for a split second she lost her composure.

“Huh? Shino?” Hotaru called back, but not in her usual cheery self. Her eyes were wide open, her face was scrunched up, and her lips were trembling. She was, quite frankly, in shock. “What’s up with that outfit?”
“Outfit? Oh, this is…” For a second Shino didn’t know what she was talking about, but one look at what she was wearing and everything made sense. Even her hair was tied up in a ponytail, something she’s never done before.
Shino was about to explain everything, but she suddenly stopped. Hotaru was acting too strange. Sure, it was expected that she would be in shock from what Shino was wearing, especially since they decided that Shino would pretend to be a boy for the mission.
Everything began with an observation.
She could tell that there was something else going on from the way Hotaru was acting. After all, her senses had been sharpened to a tee.
“I… remember…” Hotaru said softly.
Something was definitely up. “Remember? Remembered what?”
“N-Nothing!” said Hotaru. Her shoulders were shaking and her lips trembling. “Anyways, what’s up with your clothes? What happened to your uniform?”
“You see,” replied Shino. Hotaru was definitely acting suspicious, but if she said something about that she knew she wouldn’t get a straight answer. So Shino went ahead and explained the whole situation.
“Oh, I see,” said Hotaru as Shino finished his explanation. “That’s unfortunate. At least you got them fooled, right?”
“Yeah, somewhat.”
“Did Tenkawa say anything odd?”
“Say what?” replied Shino suspiciously.
Hotaru looked away. “Nevermind, forget I said that. As long as they don’t know anything it’s all good then.”
“But I actually have something I wanna ask.”
“You? What is it?”
“Marika.”
Hotaru held her breath the moment Shino uttered that name, which would have gone unnoticed if Shino hadn’t been so familiar with Hotaru by now. Years of watching her made Shino perceptive about what was normal and what was off about her. She was sweating a bit more, her eyes shifted around too much, and her fingers were too wriggly. Her actions painted a clear picture for Shino to see— that she knew something about that name.
“Itou Marika. Have you heard of that name before?”
“Nope. Who is that?”
Shino knew that was a lie. She narrowed her eyes in an attempt to find out the truth, but Hotaru noticed her change in demeanor. She cleared her throat in an attempt to throw Shino off and turned away from her.
“In any case,” she said with her back turned. “Don’t say anything unnecessary.”
She then disappeared back into the darkness with that short warning.

Shino didn’t have a word to say back to her. She only stood there in awe.

—

> *Damn it, Shino.*
>
> *Damn it, Shino. Damn it, Shino.*
>
> *Damn it, Shino. Damn it, Shino. Damn it, Shino.*

With her empty eyes staring down at the ground, Hotaru mindlessly whispered some things to herself.

> *Hurry.*
>
> *You better hurry and do it...*

The situation was getting grim for her. It wasn’t like Shino completely forgot the mission, but she was no longer the same person after coming here. The more Shino came in contact with Maihime, the more Shino grew to like her.

> Damn it, Shino.
>
> Hurry and kill her. Kill her before you become unable to.

Hotaru was hell bent on having Shino kill Maihime for her. It just had to happen, yet it was getting harder for her to control what was going on from the shadows. Sometimes, things don’t go according to plan. She had to avoid the worst case scenario at all costs.

Maihime’s death. As long as she could accomplish that, she didn’t care about anything else.

Maihime was undoubtedly strong. In fact, only Shino could take her in a head on fight, but that didn’t mean she was unbeatable. Nabariya Kurisu exposed her vulnerabilities and a way to take her down.

> *I must get things ready.*
>
> *I must get things ready.*
>
> *I must get things ready.*

Carefully. Scrupulously. Delicately. She had to finish things before Shino changed his mind completely. Before this goes on any more.
“Shino. Shino. Shino!” she yelled out loud while biting her fingernails. She thought of the Shino she just saw moments ago. The Shino who was dressed in girl clothing after all this time. That beautiful Shino… She couldn’t handle herself thinking about it.
“You were so beautiful… Yeah, beautiful!”
Her face melted as she cracked into a mischievous grin. Her face was so distorted from her twisted expression she couldn’t even see straight.
“Hehehe… Hehehehehe…” she couldn’t stop giggling as she kept walking with her head down.
However, that came to a stop as she suddenly bumped into a group of boys. She had inadvertently walked right into their cluster.
“Oww. What’s your problem, man?”
Hotaru looked at him silently, but the other boys seemed to take interest in her.
“Hey, whats up with you?” One of them said grinning. “Yo, you wanna play with us? Let’s get to know each other *real* well.”
Despite one of the boys even wrapping an arm around her, Hotaru didn’t flat out reject them. Instead, she thought of something that made her chuckle. She gave a big hug to the boy, which was so unexpected he didn’t know what to do.
“Wow, you were serious? I was just joking, you know…” but at that moment his voice trailed off. It wasn’t only that
— it was like his body just stopped working. His arms dropped to his sides and he nodded off.
Of course, that didn’t sit well with the other boys. Their laxness quickly turned into fear.
“H-Hey what’d you do?!?!” said one, while another said, “Don’t joke around like that…”
Hotaru caught them backing away in her peripheral vision, so she released the boy she was hugging and faced the others.
“Don’t be scared,” she said with a twisted smile. “I thought we were getting to know each other *real* well!”

Chapter 4: An Unavoidable Battle

If there was one fate worse than death in this world, it wouldn't be a lifetime of physical pain, but rather a lifetime of boredom.

Kurisu Nabariya had that exact fate in her plain old jail cell. She was wearing the standard Kanagawa white uniform, but her skirt was all wrinkled since she continuously slept in them.

She did have plenty of time to sleep, even more than what she needed, but she still felt so tired. Perhaps it was because she had nothing to do. Even her blonde hair and her white skin looked lackluster, presumably from her degrading mental state.

She was currently held up in Kanagawa's detention center. Her eight square meter room consisted only of a simple bed and a toilet, and for a window all she got was a tiny slit near the ceiling. Of course, every exit point was protected with metal bars as a precaution.

An extremely necessary precaution, as it turned out to be. After all, Kurisu was a spy sent from Tokyo who plotted Maihime's kidnapping after purposefully waiting for an [Unknown] attack. While both Tokyo, Kanagawa, and even Chiba for that matter all strove to protect Japan from the [Unknowns], they were rivals trying to one up one another. Maihime, unsurprisingly, had the most rivals. People weren't fond of her taking the top rankings while still refusing to go inland.

Kurisu and many other top Tokyo members were branded as traitors from the whole ordeal. The Administration Bureau contemplated heavily on what to do with the criminals so that such a thing would never happen again and launched a full investigation. There was the possibility that even the Tokyo head had already been arrested, seeing that's who Kurisu had been receiving her orders from. Despite that, Kurisu didn't really blame anyone else for what happened. She took responsibility for her own actions and her inadequacy.

She sighed. "Even so…".

It was boring. She would be here until the Bureau decided what to do with her, but there just wasn't anything to do. While her Tokyo conspirators were also in the same detention center, they were housed in different areas to prevent them from communicating with each other. She tried yelling at them a few times only to be greeted by her own echo.

The only human interaction she's had is with the guard that gave her food three times a day. If this continued for a few weeks longer, she would be so bored for so long that she could very well fall in love with him. Humans might not know this from their day to day life, but by nature they craved social interaction. Perhaps that was why some criminals enjoyed being interrogated.

Kurisu’s [World] was a [World] of deception by messing with what others perceived as objects. She could have probably escaped from here if she had kept her [World] a secret, though it was too late now. There was a time when she made herself invisible to the guard during mealtime, but the guard ignored it and dropped the food down as always. By now everyone must have known her powers so she couldn’t pull any fast ones on the guard.

She stopped making herself disappear because doing so took away precious conversation time with the guard.

One day, she heard the usual footsteps come to her cell, but this time was different because it seemed a little early to get her meal. Could the guard have fallen for her first? She shrugged— that couldn’t have been it. More than likely her punishment had been decided and she would be transported to the Bureau or something along those lines. She could do nothing but stare at the door and wait for her fate.

The door that had not once been opened since her internment unlocked and creaked open, revealing a girl on the other end.

“Huh?” Kurisu stared suspiciously at her. It obviously wasn’t the prison guard, nor was it anyone from the Bureau. No, it was another student from the same school.

She had to take a few moments to remember who she was, seeing that she had seen her before. She recalled it was the same girl that snuck into Maihime’s room with Shino. If she remembered correctly, her name was Rindou Hotaru.

“Why’re you here? Maybe you’re from the Administration Bureau?”

Hotaru snickered. “Wow you’re sharp, but you’re neither right nor wrong. I didn’t come here for that.”

“Then for what?”



“Well I was just thinking maybe I’ll bust you out of here.”
“You’ll do what?” Kurisu narrowed her eyes. “That’s fine by me, but why? What’re you trying to do? What do you want *me* to do?”
Kurisu would do anything to break out, but Hotaru’s tone sounded too suspicious. Besides, the whole timing was just too convenient. It was a huge risk to break her out, and there was always the possibility that this was just a way to kill her from the shadows.
But Hotaru just smiled patiently. “I’m not trying to do anything!” she said, extending her hand out. “After all, aren’t we *friends*?”
—
“Is it done yet?” asked Maihime.
“Not yet, please be patient just a bit more,” said a boy sitting next to her.
Maihime was too eager to sit in her assigned seat as she stared at the big machine doing its thing. She, along with many other members of the engineering team, were currently at the specialized weapon factory, dubbed “The Workshop”. Even Koujou Teppei, the head of the engineering team, was present.
He was a monster of human, coming in at almost three times Maihime’s size. Although he was just eighteen years old, he looked to be in his thirties with his unkempt beard, his stout chin, and his ruffled hair. It was as if he was the child of both a giant and a dwarf.
“To think someone’s getting a weapon personally made by Maihime,” he said, “with the top of the line Magisteel as well. Who is this lucky guy?”
“It’s not for a guy. Shino’s a girl.”
“Oh, my bad. Shino, huh…” he said, scratching his head with his big burly arms. “Isn’t she the newest Divine Pillar?”
“Yup, that’s her! She’s so strong!”
“She was the one in the mock battle, then. Wasn’t that a boy?”
The other engineering students chuckled when he said that.
“How far behind the times are you?” one of them snickered. “Last week it was all over the news: Akira Shinomiya is actually a girl! The newspaper even printed a special edition for that very thing.”
“Oh really?” He sighed. “So that makes her second person who could use pure Magisteel. I’m disappointed in the boys, not one of them can wield it. Including me, I guess.”
He took a moment to pat Maihime’s head before continuing. “Seriously. She’s fighting her heart out against those monsters and we’re all just hiding behind her within the safety of the city…”
“That’s not true! Without you guys, there would be no weapons to fight with. The only difference between those who fight in the front lines and those who support from the back are the different [Worlds] we saw! We all gotta play to our strengths. That’s the only way we can keep this city safe.”
“Alright alright,” said Koujou, patting Maihime’s head once again. “You’re naive as always.”

“Ow…” Maihime stepped away and fixed up her hair once again. “Jeez…” she said with a pout. “You always pat too hard…”
“Hearing that from you, Kanto’s strongest, is an honor,” he replied. He turned to the machine which had been slowly making more and more noise. “Seems like its just about done….”
Maihime’s eyes grew wide. “Really?”
She moved in to take a closer look, but was promptly pulled back my Koujou.
“That’s dangerous. Please wait a little longer.”
“Okay…”
She took a closer look at the machine. It was actually kind of like a coffin, but it was used to create the cartridges used for the specialized weapons. In addition, with the help of Koujou and the rest of his team, Maihime was able to forge and polish Shino’s new weapon. Once the cartridges were added on by the machine, the weapon would be finished.
Soon, the lamp on the machine switched from red to green as it gave off a beep.
“Nice,” said Koujou, walking up to the machine. Once he turned the knob, the machine completely opened up with a bunch of steam that filled the room.
“You can come on over now,” said Koujou.
Maihime nodded and peered into the machine. Even though it was a mostly black blade with a black hilt, it was somehow glistening under the light. Perhaps it was because its cross guard was gold in the shape of a butterfly. Or maybe it was because the blade itself had an intricately designed gold pattern on it. In any case, it was certainly no ordinary blade. It was literally one of a kind.
The blade itself was straight and narrow while the handle was illuminated by a green cartridge.
“Wow….” Maihime said instinctively. She was deeply involved in making it, but even she was still surprised by the finished product.
Koujou took a sigh of relief. “Everything worked out nicely,” he said, stroking his chin once again. “This blade needs a name, huh…”
“Yes it does!”
“So what’s it name?”
Maihime giggled. “I’m not gonna tell you just yet! The owner should be the first to know, right?”
“Ah, you’re absolutely right.”
He chuckled and took the sword, along with its beautifully crafted sheath, and handed it to Maihime.
“Go ahead and sheath it too,” he said. “We can’t have you going around with an open blade.”
“Got it, thanks!”

Maihime rested her hand on the blunt side of the blade and smoothly slid it right into the sheath. Not only was the sheath a perfect fit, it made a satisfying metallic sound as well.
“Let’s hope Shino will like it, Maihime.”
She could do nothing but nod to that with a smile that went from ear to ear.
—
“……”
Shino was sitting down with her eyes fixated on her cell phone in the middle of her own room. She was staring so intently at the screen she wasn’t even moving a muscle, but she just couldn’t figure things out.
It had been about an hour since she’s been like this. For someone who valued time and efficiency, this was a rare moment for her.
There was a good reason why: Displayed on her screen was the login page for her backdoor communications with the Bureau. Normally, these communication lines would only be opened if she was about to die or another event of that magnitude, but she knew she had to do this.
As an agent, she swore an oath to never return until her mission was over, but this time she had to ask *why*.
“Damn it.”
She threw her cell phone on the table and stood up. Her arms and legs were getting sore after sitting down for so long, so she took a trip to the kitchen and got a bottle of water from her refrigerator. She was more thirsty than she thought after finishing the whole bottle in one gulp before returning back to her room.
On the way back, she took a good hard look at the schoolgirl uniform she was now wearing through the reflection of her own window. Everyone found out her true gender last week, so Maihime graciously sent her some female uniforms to wear. Shino didn’t mind continuing wearing her male uniforms, but Ginko and Zakuro would go crazy if they found out she wasn’t wearing the ones Maihime gave her personally. Plus, since literally everyone in the city knew by now, there wasn’t a point in hiding it any more.
She was wearing thick tights because she never got used to the skirt by itself, and she was sporting the same ponytail style Maihime insisted she have. With all this in mind, she felt like Maihime had taken over her body without her realizing. No, perhaps it was her who had been taken in by Maihime’s kindness before she realized it.
Shino didn’t want to admit it, but she had grown fond of Maihime’s strength, sense of justice, and straightforwardness. It was the first time in her life she felt this way towards another person, much less a person she was supposed to kill.
She didn’t want to kill her, but she knew full well it could be because of her bias towards her. One of the worst things an assassin could do was to grow attached to the target. In fact, it was bad for her to think on her own rather than following orders. She should be thinking about ways to carry out the mission and not on anything else.

Despite all those rules drilled into her head, she couldn’t help but question the motive. Why would they want to kill a girl like her?”
Shino grabbed her phone and opened the communication lines with a deep breath. Half a minute later, her phone beeped and a voice answered.
“This is Kanaya. Did something happen?”
The person who was on the line was Shino’s direct superior, Kanaya Hisahide, who answered in the calmest voice she had heard in a while.
Shino took a deep breath to compose herself before answer. “Yes. There’s something I would like to ask.”
“What is it?”
“It’s about the reason behind Tenkawa Maihime’s assassination order. From what I’ve seen so far, she isn’t a target that needs to be taken care of. Why is this mission necessary?”
“What? Do you realize what you’re saying?” replied Kanaya in a soft but commanding voice. “I told you already, that is classified information.”
“I understand that. I was just exploring the possibility of another way of handling this.”
“That’s enough. You must have your reasons for saying that, but Tenkawa Maihime has to die. Other plans like removing her as the head, jailing her, or deporting her back inland won’t work. Her very existence is troublesome. That’s it. You aren’t questioning the decision made by the Bureau, are you?”
“No, of course not,” Shino replied, sweating. “But—”
Before Shino could say any more, her room door suddenly slammed open. It was Hotaru, the only other person who had the key to her room. She smiled like she knew exactly what was going on, but stomped her way to Shino and yanked the phone right out of her hands.
“This is Rindou… Yes… Yes. Everything is fine. The mission will be completely soon. Yes… Bye.”
She immediately hung up the phone and tossed it to Shino.
“Shino…” she said in a tone that sent chills down Shino’s spine. “What are you doing? Why’re you contacting Kanaya?”
“I…” Shino wanted to say her side of the story, but didn’t after thinking about it. After all, she was in the wrong, not Hotaru. She knew she wasn’t thinking straight right now.
“What’s going on with you? You’re acting strange. Why’re so concerned with that girl? She’s just someone who’s about to die soon, right? We stalk her, kill her, and that’s it. Are you not satisfied with that? Besides… ”
“Hotaru?” interrupted Shino. She wasn’t used to hearing Hotaru ramble on and on like this.
The situation wasn’t normal, so she understood why Hotaru wasn’t acting the way she did. They were supposed to do this mission together, but now Shino was questioning the mission and even trying to stop it by appealing directly to their superior. It wouldn’t even be surprising if the Bureau had her killed for that, and if they did, Hotaru would probably be killed as well by association. She certainly did not want that to happen.

“You wanna know the reason?” Hotaru continued ranting. “Well, we don’t need to. As long as the Bureau okays it, isn’t that good enough? You keep asking why we have to kill her, but what reasons do you have for keeping her alive? Why are you so intent on going against the Bureau and siding with her?”

“I....” Shino’s voice dropped off.

She could think of many reasons why Maihime was essential to the city off the top of her head. Certainly, she was strong and was the backbone of the city. The city —even the country— would have a hard time filling her shoes if she was gone.

Despite that, the Bureau determined that she had to die. This wasn’t a decision an agent like Shino could overturn easily, too. The bigger the target, the bigger the fallback. If that decision turned out to be wrong, the country may never recover from the consequences.

“Let me ask you once again, Shino. What are we doing here? What’s your mission?” asked Hotaru.

—

In her usual high spirits, Maihime was cheerfully humming a song she couldn’t remember the lyrics to as she made her way down her dorm hall. She was wearing her classic uniform and overcoat, but in her hands was something she never had before. Indeed, it was soon to be Shino’s new blade.

“Hehehe, she’ll definitely be happy about this!”

Maihime couldn’t wait another second to deliver the blade after she took it from the workshop, so she headed straight to Shino’s place.

“Huh?”

Maihime suddenly stopped in front of Shino’s room. She could hear some faint chatter on the other side of her door. She certainly didn’t feel comfortable eavesdropping, so she went for a knock on Shino’s door. Before she was able to, she was able to pick up some words that stopped her straight in her tracks. Shino was talking to someone and somehow Maihime’s name came up in their conversation.

“My name....?” she thought to herself. She didn’t like it, but she pressed her ear to the door and listened in.

—

“.... kill Tenkawa Maihime,” Shino said softly.

“That’s right. That’s our mission. Nothing else.”

“I know that already.”

“You knew? Then what were you doing for the past week? You let her know your true gender, you wore the clothes she gave you, and you even let her choose your hairstyle! Are these things all part of the plan?”

Shino couldn’t respond. Hotaru’s words were just making her more and more distressed.

Hotaru leaned in on Shino and gave her a pat. “Hey, listen. Where did the real Shino go? The cool, calm, and collected Shino who was ruthless in

carrying out missions. You certainly aren’t her… Kill Maihime, and return to your true self.”
Her voice had a tint of sorrow in it to appeal to Shino’s emotions.
“Okay.” Shino sighed and pushed Hotaru’s hand away. “I know…”
Shino struggled to say even those words. She didn’t feel like she was being herself.
“Wait, whose there?!” Shino suddenly shouted. She heard a faint noise through her door and immediately ran to it and slammed it open.
Yet she saw no one else.
“What’s going on, Shino?”
“No, I just thought I heard something outside,” said Shino. She took another good look around before closing her door once again. “In any case, there’s nothing more to discuss. I got it. I will do the mission, but I will decide when I carry it out.”
“Okay…. Fine. But if you drag it on too much longer, I’m gonna do it myself.”
You’ll what?”
Hotaru grinned. “Hey, I’m an agent too, you know.”
—
In a random area behind Shino’s dormitory, Maihime had to calm herself down against a wall. Her heart was pounding hard, her face dripped with sweat, and her lungs felt like they were about to explode. Of course, it wasn’t like she was out of breath from running for a bit. No, she just didn’t know how to react after hearing what she heard in Shino’s room.
Shino came here to kill me?
She didn’t understand what was going on. Not one bit. She slid down the wall slowly with the blade still in her hands until she hit the ground. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t grasp the situation. Instead, the more she thought about it, the more depressed she became.
Shino’s transfer. Her mock battle. The first date. The battle with the Triton-class [Unknown]. Now they were all tainted memories, memories that now haunted her by having death lurk around the corner.
No, no, no. Maihime bit down hard on her teeth and shook her head.
With a big gasp of air, she slammed her face into the wall and screamed the loudest she had ever screamed. Her slam was so powerful the wall cracked, and her scream was so loud even the dormitory itself was shaking. She could hear some of the students open their window to see what was going on.
“Alright!”
Somehow that got her more motivated than ever. Now wasn’t the time to worry
— it was never the time to. She wasn’t the type of person to wait until everything magically became clear to her. Instead, she would be the one to seek the truth.

Besides, what she ultimately heard was just from eavesdropping. There was always the possibility that she just misheard or simply got the wrong context for everything.
She couldn't jump to any conclusions before directly asking Shino herself.
She could have gone through this the stealthy way and tried to pry information from Shino bit by bit, but that just wasn't her style. She never dealt with things strategically, but rather face them head on no matter what it was. She had her pride on the line as the strongest in Kanto.
She pulled out her cell phone and started writing her text. If everything was just a misunderstanding, then it was all good. She would apologize and give Shino the blade. On the other hand, if what she heard was true…
She took a deep breath before sending the message.
—
A few minutes after Hotaru had left, Shino felt her phone ring in her pocket. This came as a surprise to her since there were very few people who knew her number. She thought of Hotaru's words earlier and got anxious.
Luckily, it was from Maihime. She remembered that they had shared IDs during her induction meeting to the Four Pillars.
"I wonder what she wants…" she said to herself, opening the message and taking a quick peek.
What is this…
—
The outskirts of the city were a far cry away from the city. Rough winds ran unhinged between the ruins, causing dust to stick to Shino's uniform. That, combined with the fact that she had to tread carefully through the broken down road made for a very unpleasant experience. One couldn't even call it a road anymore
— only markers were there to show where the road should be.
Around her were the remnants of what was once a city. If buildings had a graveyard, this place would be it. What was once a bustling city now reeked of death. Even the so called "park" here didn't fare much better.
Believe it or not, this place was once called the Kanagawa prefecture, the area furthest from the inland. Behind her were the walls that marked the city of Kanagawa, and in front lay a vast, but bleak horizon.
Shino was here not because she liked walking these desolate ruins, but rather because Maihime called her out here yesterday with a text message. The message was short and concise: to come here the next day during a specified time. Despite replying and asking her why, Shino didn't get any more messages from her so she had to come here without knowing what was going on.
"Where are you, Tenkawa?" Shino shouted out, his voice echoing in the distance. There wasn't anyone in sight.
After a minute, Shino heard a rock crumble to the ground. Turning around, she could tell it was Maihime.
"Hey," greeted Shino, walking up to her..

“Shino.” Maihime replied softly.
Shino was taken aback. This wasn’t the Maihime she knew.
“Why did you call me out here?”
“Shino, I have something to ask you.”
“Me?”
Maihime nodded. “Did you come here to kill me?”
“.........”
Shino instinctively held her breath. She didn’t know how to respond, but did all she could in acting like it was no big deal.
With a calm voice, she said, “What are you saying?”
“Answer me.”
Maihime was unfazed. Her gaze was so powerful it felt like she could see right through Shino, so she remained silent. She wondered how Maihime could have ever known in the first place. Sure, Maihime had her doubts about her, but to pinpoint assassination… Now that shouldn’t have happened.
If that was the case, then this was just another one of Maihime’s tricks to get information out of her. Surely that was why she confronted her.
“.........”
No, Shino quickly discarded that thought. Just the look in her eyes told Shino that she wasn’t playing around.
At that moment, she thought of something. Yesterday, when she was talking with Hotaru in her room, she did hear a suspicious noise, and everything would make sense if that turned out to be Maihime. After all, Maihime felt like a different person compared to the last time she saw her.
“No way….” she whispered.
She went one step further. What if it was Hotaru who purposely made Maihime listen in? She would then create a divide between the two which would clearly benefit her.
No, that was too far fetched. Besides, now wasn’t the time to think of how Maihime came across this information. She had to respond properly first.
On initial thought, the best course of action was to feign ignorance. If Shino didn’t divulge any information, then Maihime couldn’t verify her suspicions.
That being said, there was the possibility that she knew everything already. Perhaps the other Divine Pillars were hiding in the ruins around them. If that was the case, then there wouldn’t be any point in confessing now.
However, if that wasn’t the case, then Shino had to avoid a confession at all costs. So, playing dumb was by far the best course of action.
But that wasn’t what she did.
“If I said yes, what’re you gonna do?”
It was the last thing she should have said, but she said it anyways.
She wondered why she said such a thing. She just couldn’t lie to Maihime, especially not with the stare she was giving her right now. And, if she couldn’t lie right now, she had to dart around the truth.

“I see…” Maihime whispered back. There wasn’t so much a hint of shock in her. In fact, she seemed ready to face the truth no matter what it was. Maihime slowly brought out a katana under her big overcoat with her left hand. Seeing this, Shino instinctively grabbed her katana as well, but soon realized that Maihime wasn’t using the enormous slab of metal she usually used.

While Shino was wondering why she would suddenly swap to a different weapon, Maihime tossed the katana over to her side.

“What? Why?” said Shino as she caught it. She took a look at it suspiciously and realized it was another specialized weapon. After unsheathing it, she couldn’t help but notice the black blade that somehow sparkled in the sun. One look was all she needed to know that this was no ordinary blade. The sharpness of it alone made her current one feel like a butter knife.

“Use that. You won’t be able to fight properly with that standard-issued one, right?”

She pulled out her very own giant blade that Shino was initially expecting from under her overcoat before saying a few more words.

“I won’t ask you the reason

— you probably wouldn’t even tell me anyways. But if you want my head, fight me right here and now.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I… If you really came here to kill me, I’ve been thinking about what to do about it… And I came to one conclusion.”

“Which is?”

“I… I like you,” replied Maihime sincerely. “Ah, but not in that way.”

Shino stayed silent.

“When I’m with you I have so much fun. When I fight with you I feel so relieved. When you’re happy, I’m happy. Those are my feelings whether you want to kill me or not. That’s even how I feel now,” she said, pointing her blade at Shino. “That will never change. So, I’ll make this easy for you to understand. If you win, you can take my head. But if I win, you’re mine.”

“W-What are you saying, Tenkawa?”

A single drop of sweat rolled down her cheek. She certainly did not expect Maihime to say that.

“I’m ready to bet my life on this. Unless… you don’t think you can win against me fair and square?”

Shino sighed at Maihime’s obvious provocation, but she would be in a really bad spot if she were to back away now. Now that Maihime knew everything, it was only a matter of time before everyone else knew, and that could lead to Shino getting arrested just like that. Once arrested, she would probably be sent back to the Bureau if it was ever revealed that they were the ones who sent her, but it wasn’t hard to imagine the punishment she’d get for screwing up, especially since she had so many chances to do it.

“……………………”

Shino couldn’t feel any bad blood coming from Maihime. With another sigh, she threw her old katana on the ground and held out her new one, taking a step forward into her usual battle stance.
There was nothing she could do now to change the situation, so Shino had no choice but to kill her.
In front of her stood the strongest fighter she had ever known, but she was prepared to accept whatever outcome this battle would have. This was the least she could do to honor Maihime’s resolve.
“Come.”
Maihime disappeared from her sight upon hearing that, leaving a trail of dust where she once was. She came face to face with Shino in the blink of an eye, ready to smash her to bits.
Despite that, Shino didn’t even flinch. She would certainly be scared if this was their first meeting, but it wasn’t. She knew *everything* about her after observing her for so long. This not only included everything about her daily life, but her fighting style as well, all the way down to the little habits she had when she moved. Shino knew what movements Maihime would do even before she herself knew. As such, it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that right now Shino knew Maihime better than she did herself.
That’s why Shino didn’t falter
— she had anticipated Maihime’s every move. Shino’s natural instincts were to back away, especially seeing Maihime suddenly pop out in front her, but she knew better than to do that. Had she done that, Maihime would unleash a fury of strikes no human could withstand and she would be done for.
Shino crouched down to her right and sidestepped Maihime’s first strike, all while drawing her own blade out. Of course, she had no intention of brute forcing her way to victory, since her arm would be long gone before she could ever do anything.
Shino raised her eyebrows in astonishment. “Wow…” she thought to herself. She wasn’t surprised by Maihime’s first strike, but rather the very katana she was holding.
Now that she was holding the katana, she knew she had underestimated it initially. The hilt itself seemed to fuse with her hand, giving her absolute control over the entire thing. She felt like the katana itself was specially made for her, and the sharpness was nothing to scoff at either.
Now wasn’t the time to be amazed, though. Maihime had predicted Shino’s sidestep and did one of her own, ending it with another swing at an awkward, yet effective angle.
“Wow! Hahahaha!” laughed Maihime in the middle of her strike. “You’re amazing, Shino! You’re so damn strong!”
Shino barely managed to defend herself by redirecting Maihime’s monstrous power off to the side.
“This…. this feeling! I’ve never felt this before! I need you, Shino! I want you!”
“Stop screwing around.”

“I’m not!” Maihime shouted back, throwing more strikes at Shino. “I like you! No, I love you! I love you a lot! Please, please be by my side and fight with me! Together we can protect this city! Together, we’ll be the strongest!”

Despite getting annoyed at Maihime not taking this seriously, Shino didn’t have any more time to respond. She had to spend all her concentration on deflecting Maihime’s repeated blows, but during the third or fourth strike Shino found a good opportunity to counterattack, looking Maihime straight in the face and putting all her power into a strike of her own. Her own blade resonated as if it was inspired by all the power she was suddenly putting into it, sending an invisible slash directly to Maihime’s face.

She knew full well that this attack wouldn’t be enough to defeat her, but it wasn’t like she could let the opportunity go either. So, just as Maihime was about to talk again, an invisible slash went right through her mouth, but unexpectedly she stopped it with only her teeth.

Even for Maihime this was unexpected. Shino’s [World] slash wasn’t a guaranteed hit and could be countered, but it was invisible. Even so, Shino moved in for a physical slash this time.

She suddenly stopped as she saw that Maihime had already brought up her sword and was ready for a full powered strike.

“Damn!” She immediately released her [World] and leapt to the left.

Once Maihime brought down her sword, the whole area blew up under her in a flash of light. Shino would have been done for had she stayed even one second longer. The ground took the brunt of her attack instead, ripping even the rocks to shreds.

Shino had evaded far enough that Maihime couldn’t follow up with another attack, so she had the time to look at the destruction caused by only one of her blows.

“As always you have some disgusting strength, Tenkawa. What kind of [World] did you see?”

Maihime’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

Shino said that not to get a response from her, but to distract her enough to take her out of the zone. She had to be extremely naive to think that any opponent would be foolish enough to stop the battle and explain his or her powers just because she asked.

But that’s exactly what Maihime did.

“[Worlds]… huh?” she said. “These were the things we saw during our cold sleeps, right? If that’s the case, I didn’t see anything particularly special.”

She was completely unaware Shino did that to stall the battle and answered truthfully.

“The [World] I saw…” she continued, “was a happy [World]. A peaceful [World] where my Dad, Mom, Hotaru, and me lived happily ever after.

“Say what…?”

Shino had never heard of such a detailed [World] in her life, but Maihime didn’t seem like she was lying. Besides, Maihime’s powers seemed to come

from her manifestation of her aura into the real world and nothing else. She didn’t have anything special like Zakuro’s teleportation or Ginko’s keen sense of smell. It was just the clean conversion of her [World] to brute strength.
“What about you, Shino?” grinned Maihime. Perhaps she knew Shino’s plan all along.
“Me?”
“Yeah, you’re [World]. It’s not fair if I’m the only one talking, right? What did you dream about?”
Shino stayed quiet for a few moments before speaking again.
“I’m not such an idiot to reveal that in a battle.”
Maihime pouted. “Wow, you were the one who asked me!”
Tsk. It wasn’t like Shino had anything to hide for strategic reasons. Shino couldn’t remember a single thing in her cold sleep. If she tried to think about it, the mysterious headaches would appear again.
She wondered what kind of [World] she had to see to be able to touch anything in her sight. More importantly, she wondered why she had never questioned it. It was as if every time she was curious about the [World] she saw, something in her head would unconsciously direct her thoughts to something else.
Despite that, now that she was thinking about it, one question turned to ten other ones, and those ten questions she had about herself gave rise to a creepy feeling in her head.
“What’s going on? I’m…” she couldn’t finish her words. Now wasn’t the time to be bothered about such things. The thing she should be focusing on was this battle, since a single mistake could cost her her life.
The two got into their battle stances, and like last time Maihime jumped at her to initiate the fight. Shino was also able to again dodge the shots coming her way, but she knew that she couldn’t keep this up.
Now was the time to use Maihime’s own power against her. As Maihime slammed her sword down the next time, Shino used her katana to stop the blow, but immediately pivoted so that she could use that power to jump away from her.
In a flash, Shino brought out her [World] once again, bringing the whole area into her vision. This time, however, she wasn’t looking at Maihime. Instead, she was focusing on the glass in the run down buildings behind her as she finally unleashed her first art with a swing of her sword.
Utsubomi.
An invisible slash ran through the glass, shattering it and sending its pieces down to Maihime.
“W-Woah!” shouted Maihime, running forward to dodge everything.
Shino knew all to well that something like that wouldn’t even scratch her, but it was necessary for her to follow up with her actual attack. This time, instead of just focusing on Maihime in her sights, she also looked through the million pieces of glass around her that all had her reflection.

And then she swung her second art, with even more power this time.
Senjin.
In an incredible display of superhuman reaction time, Maihime immediately spun around with her sword. She must have felt the flurry of attacks coming even though she couldn't see them.
There was also a time where Maihime was able to defend against this very move, but this time Shino struck in places she couldn't possibly defend against, made possible by all the data she gathered about her.
A 360 degree invisible barrage of strikes. Even if Maihime was the strongest, there was no possible way she could defend against them all no matter how hard she tried. With a few grunts here and there mixed with the constant sound of two metals hitting each other, Maihime danced and parried her way out of it.
As expected, even she couldn't get out unscathed, as seen by blood dripping down her arm.
Seeing Maihime hurt like that almost made Shino cry out for her, but she did everything in her power to not let that happen. She just couldn't understand why she shuddered at the sight of Maihime hurt even if she was the one who caused it.
Unfortunately, that didn't go unnoticed by Maihime. She strenuously caught her breath and closed in on Shino in an instant, ready to lay down the hammer once again.
"You're such a nice person, Shino, but is this really the time to be worried about others?"
She slammed her sword down on her.
Shino went to block it, but she was a step too late. She wasn't composed enough to fight at her best, so her senses were dulled.
As the sword got closer, the massive aura behind it began to suffocate Shino. Her life flashed before her eyes until she only saw the image of death. Even her body unconsciously tightened up to prepare for her inevitable end.
Yet Maihime' sword grazed by her hair and struck the ground beside her. The ground rattled as if it screamed out in pain while the resulting shockwave blasted Shino away.
Once Shino realized she was still alive, she knew instantly that Maihime shouldn't have missed that attack. She missed on purpose.
"Ugh!!" Shino cried out in anger. The feelings she had for Maihime mixed with the raw emotion she felt being disrespected like and that made her go crazy.
Maihime's missed attack created a small opening for Shino to counterattack, so counterattack she did. She took a step inwards slammed her shoulder into Maihime with every last ounce of strength she had left, knocking her down onto the ground.
As strong as Maihime was, she still had the frame of a small girl. An attack like that that caught her off guard could easily knock her down.

“Ahhhhhhh!” Shino immediately jumped on top of her, reached for her katana, and placed it right at her throat, ready to slice it at a moment’s notice.

But… she couldn’t do it. Instead, she barely scratched the surface of Maihime’s neck as she stabbed her katana into the ground.

A rare moment of peace resulted as the two caught their breath. Just as Maihime had purposely missed her attack, Shino had done the same. The two were now so close to each other they felt each other’s breaths, but didn’t exchange a single word, opting to just stare at each other.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Unbeknownst to her, Shino started to cry the more she stared at Maihime’s adorable face. What was going on?



“Shino…”
“Huh? What is this…?”
She didn’t realize she was crying at first, but immediately covered her eyes when she did. Why was she crying? She slowly stood up, trembling, and ran away.
“Shino, I…”
Maihime got up and called out to her, but Shino didn’t turn back. For some reason she just couldn’t stand being in front of her right now, so she had no choice but to run away.
“Shino!”

Chapter 5: Hime

"Nice, that's everything for now!" Aoi said to herself, taking a long needed stretch break after sitting in front of the computer for a while.
She was in the student council room finishing up her monthly report for the South Kanto's Administration Bureau. While Kanagawa's student council had the best fighters, only Aoi could do the paperwork properly, so it wasn't a surprise to see all the work handed down to her.
"I guess Shinomiya would be good at this stuff too…"
This time she scratched her face. Even so, there's no denying Shino's strength on the battlefield. Her [World] was so powerful it would be a waste to have her do the mundane office work.
She sighed and turned off the computer. She took a moment to organize all the paperwork before leaving the room, but she happened to stumble upon two familiar faces in the hall outside.
"Oh hey, Otonashi and Sajihara."
"What's up Aoi!"
They waved at her.
"What's that you're holding?" asked Ginko.
"Oh this? This is just a report for the Bureau. I have some business with them too, so I thought I'd deliver this myself."
Hearing this, the two simultaneously cleared their throats.
"Sorry," said Ginko, while Zakuro continued for her.
"We make you do so much work Aoi while we just chill around…"
"No, no, it's all good," reassured Aoi, but her body said otherwise. She looked really sleepy and had sweat dripping down her cheek. "I can do this myself."
The two took a moment to appreciate her hard work before speaking up. This time, Zakuro faced her panda and continued.
"Besides why are you still using paper can't you just send everything by email or something?"
"I-I guess, but I figured I'd do this the proper way. I'm not much of an electronics person…"
Ginko tapped Zakuro on the shoulder. "Zakuro, you forgot that she's pretty good friends with some of the Bureau people."
"Ah right I forgot about that you see I'm not too good with them you see they act like we know each other and always face us when they talk to us."
Aoi chuckled. "Well, that's normal human behavior…" she said.
Zakuro was the abnormal one here, having never even looked at Aoi during this whole conversation.
"They're good people," she continued. "and they're always so kind to us. So how about it, you two? Apparently they just got some new tea so its their treat!"
"So the business there you had was for some tea?" Ginko asked.

“N-No, that’s not all of it of course… I still have to report…”
Ginko laughed and nodded her head. “I wasn’t saying that was a bad thing, you know. You’ve worked so hard today so I think this is well deserved.”
“You’re too kind…”
“Ah! In any case, did you come from the student council room?”
“Yeah I did, why?”
“Was Maihime there?”
“No, I was alone…”
Both Ginko and Zakuro shuddered without saying anything back.
“Umm, is there a problem?”
“Well I haven’t seen her since yesterday,” replied Ginko. “I even checked her room and she wasn’t there.”
Zakuro continued for her. “Yesterday I heard she was at the workshop but after that I have no clue where she went perhaps she finally finished that weapon and delivered it to Shino but when I went to her room as well she wasn’t there…”
“Oh really? Where was she?”
“I don’t know I haven’t seen her as well.”
“So in essence,” said Aoi deep in thought. “The two are out somewhere, right?”
The two hadn’t even thought of that possibility until Aoi brought it up. As expected, they were not pleased at all.
“So you’re saying… Shino kidnapped her?!?!?” shouted Ginko.
“How did you come to that conclusion? Even if they were together, maybe they just went out or something like that.”
But Zakuro was hearing none of it. “N-N-No way Aoi we are in a grave situation here how dare she sneak behind our backs to meet with Maihime secretly!”
“Exactly!” agreed Ginko. “She could even be convincing Maihime to repay her with her body right now…”
“Wow excellent thought Ginko I never would have thought of that but it sounds so plausible.”
“Calm down you two. Shinomiya’s a girl, right? You guys worry too much…”
“What are you saying Aoi you should never let your guard down.”
“Zakuro’s right! Maihime’s purity is at risk!”
For some reason, right after Ginko said that she and Zakuro immediately turned around and started to look for something.
“What’s going on?” Aoi asked. She didn’t notice whatever they had noticed.
“No it’s just that I felt someone tap my shoulder,” said Zakuro.
“But there’s no one here… What’s—” Ginko words trailed off as both her and Zakuro’s body went limp and their heads suddenly dropped unconscious.
“H-Hey Otonashi, Sajihara? What’s wrong? Hey!” Aoi said in a panic, trying to shake them awake to no avail.

She suddenly felt someone grab her shoulder and turned around to find out who it was, but couldn't find anyone as well. She felt like she had just been touched by a spirit.
"That was…" and then it hit her. Invisibility. Unconsciousness. Yes, she had an idea of what was going on.
But it was too late. Her vision blacked out and soon she felt nothing.
—
"Ughhh…."
Shino was rolled up in pain groaning her brains out. She had the worst headache she's ever had in her life— she felt like her head going to explode any moment. Sure she's had headaches before, but nothing ever *this* bad.
It had to be Maihime who caused all of this. Not from her directly, but she knew that the headache only came up every time she thought of or talked about her. In fact, the pain she felt now started right when she was about to slice Maihime's throat during their fight and showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. It was as if Shino's body itself was telling her not to kill Maihime.
After a few labored breaths, she collapsed against a very dusty wall, getting dust everywhere on her body.
She didn't go back to the city yet, instead opting to stay in the outskirts next to some broken down building. Her headache was so severe she had no choice but to run away and hide around the area, which didn't turn out too bad for her. Maihime could have arrested her right then and there if she had run straight back to the city,.
No, that wasn't true— Maihime wasn't like that. She knew she couldn't be too optimistic as an infiltrator, but she was certain of that fact. She just didn't know why even through all the data she had collected on her. Her trust in Maihime was based on something else… something akin to them being lifelong friends.
As she was trying to think about what to do, a small girl's voice suddenly appeared and said something right in her head.
I'm really scared if you aren't by my side…
"Who… was that? What's going on?" she asked herself. Things were spiraling out of control for her.
The girl she saw didn't seem familiar at all… No… now that Shino thought of it, she saw her in the picture she found at Maihime's place.
"Tenkawa… and I?"
She seemed to have recalled something, but knew there were no memories to recall. What was going on? She felt sick to her stomach.
There has to be something.
Shino closed her eyes and really thought back. Because of the effects of the cold sleep, for her the war only started ten years ago, even for other people it was closer to thirty. There was no way she could remember everything that happened before then.

The things she could remember clearly were her family and Hotaru. She didn't tell anyone yet, but Hotaru and her were really close friends even before they became coworkers. Shino remembered that they always played together since they lived pretty close to each other.

Shino and Hotaru were always together even when the [Unknowns] came and they had to enter into their cold sleeps. Hotaru was scared because she was assigned a different facility, but Shino said everything was fine and comforted—

Wait a second. That's odd… Shino and Hotaru couldn't have been in different facilities. Shino knew that for sure because they were talking to each other next to their capsules right before they each went to sleep. Besides, that very facility experienced a cave in that destroyed half of the facility sometime during their cold sleep, so when Shino woke up she was already in a hospital bed. Holding her hand next to her was Hotaru who had woken up before her.

I remember now.

At that time, in the darkest of darknesses, Shino felt a soft hand bring her back to reality. Her thoughts became more comprehensible and her vision became clearer until she saw a crying Hotaru in front of her.

(Ah…)

(Oh thank goodness… I didn't know what I'd do if you didn't wake up…)

(Where… am I?)

(I don't know either, but apparently we're in a medical center in a place called the Bureau?)

(Who are you?)

(What are you saying? I'm Hotaru! You're my friend, remember?)

Shino recalled the conversation she had with her after she had just woken up. Her memories were hazy back then because of the unfortunate accident, but it was then that Shino remembered everything about her friend Hotaru.

Then it hit her. Her head which had been racing at a thousand miles per hour just now suddenly cooled down as she arrived at one possible conclusion. It wasn't a pretty one, but nothing else could explain all the haziness she had in her memories.

"No way…" murmured Shino. This was the last thing she wanted to be true, because it meant that her life up to this point was a lie with no taking back what she had lost.

She sighed and used the wall to help her stand back up. Now wasn't the time to get emotional. If there was one thing to take from all her training at the Bureau, it was to keep pushing onward. She had to confirm for herself, even if the truth invalidated the past few years of her life.

She took her newly received katana and stumbled her way forward.

—

"I see…"

Hotaru was sitting with another girl in a cafe's open terrace inside the city.

"So Shino's no good, huh?" she said.

“Looks that way. She had the chance to end it but missed on purpose,” the girl replied.
The girl was Hotaru’s “friend,” made true thanks to her [World]. Hotaru always said her “friends” were necessary to help Shino, but there were no telling how many “friends” she had made throughout all her undercover missions.
To lower suspicion by making everything seem more natural, Hotaru carefully deactivated and reactivated her [World] within her “friends.” By doing so, she could observe the whole city without even moving a single muscle.
She had told Shino that her [World] erased the memories of those under its influence, but that was just a small portion of her powers. Revealing everything to Shino would mean telling her all her weak points. She had to keep some things secret even if she was her partner.
“Okay…” replied Hotaru, taking a sip of her orange juice. She was not looking too pleased.
She had anticipated something going down between Maihime and Shino so she sent the girl out to scout, though she wasn’t pleased with the results.
“I guess I knew this would happen,” she continued with a sigh. “As I thought, this is no fun!”
She slammed the table in frustration. Shino couldn’t pull the trigger even with all the work she put into it. She was beyond pissed.
“Whatever. Where’s Maihime now?”
“She went back to the city to rest up for a bit, though she did head out soon after.”
“Out? To the same place?”
“No, this time she’s heading to the seaside park next to the ocean.”
Hotaru’s eyes narrowed. “Oh really? That park? What a coincidence… or was it? Well isn’t this just great…” she said with a smirk. “Alright thanks for all the info.”
She got up and walked away, making sure to touch the girl’s hand before leaving and saying, “Release.”
Saying the word “Release” was important because it served as a chant for her to disperse her [World]. That, along with a physical touch, was enough to undo its effects. It might have been a good idea to keep her pawns a little bit longer, but she preferred to release and erase the memories of those who had just reported vital information for her as soon as possible. Even though her “friends” very rarely leaked information, she couldn’t be too sure it wouldn’t happen here.
Besides, there was a certain “capacity” that she didn’t want to use recklessly.
“See ya around,” she said.
But suddenly, the girl said, “Wait. When should I report the next batch of information?”
“Huh?”

The girl’s comment made her stop straight in her tracks. For some reason she was still in Hotaru’s [World], so Hotaru looked down on her hand as she opened and closed it for a few times. She knew she had certainly touched her, but her [World] still lingered within…

Her plan to look cool while leaving backfired spectacularly, leaving her a little embarrassed. She coughed to hide it and once again went to touch her, though this time she went for the head.

“Release.”

It seemed like it succeeded this time, since the girl’s body immediately shook and her head went blank. Hotaru took a good look around her before leaving for real this time.

—

Maihime stared blankly out into the ocean as she heard the constant sound of the waves crashing against the shore. She was in the outskirts of the city in what used to be a park without another soul in sight.

No one liked to come here because the area was too desolate and too close to the gate where [Unknowns] came out from, but Maihime liked to sneak here when she felt like it. Sometimes she came when she was sad, and sometimes she came when she was happy. Regardless of how she felt, she had the urge to just stare out into the ocean from time to time.

On the other hand, she didn’t come here to be alone— she had her room for that. No, she always waited for Rindou Hotaru so the two of them could be alone together. After all, this was the very place they went to right before their respective cold sleeps.

Hotaru had never appeared anymore after that, yet that didn’t faze Maihime at all. Even if the world had changed for the worse, listening to the nostalgic sounds of the ocean and the beautiful view of the horizon made her feel as if Hotaru was right next to her.

“Hotaru…” Maihime whispered. She wondered how long it had been since that clash with Shino that went nowhere.

She rubbed the side of her stomach to quell the pain taken from Shino’s attacks. She had already gone into the city to heal up, but there were still stains of blood on her clothes. Even though the wound would heal if she rested for a night in her recovery mode, for now this was sufficient.

As she had suspected, Shino was strong. Of course, the weapon she was using was 100% Magisteel compared to the 60% she was using before, so that alone might have made her stronger than ever.

Even so, Maihime felt Shino had become much stronger even if she wasn’t wielding that blade. She was quick in reacting to her every move, efficient in her movement, and most importantly, she knew how to use her [World] to the best of her abilities. No matter how she saw it, Shino was the strongest of the strongest.

If Shino hadn’t hesitated when she dealt that blow to her, or if Shino didn’t miss her throat… Maihime wouldn’t be alive right now. She couldn’t help thinking about a bunch of what-ifs, even if she knew it was bad to do so.

“Shino…” she whispered as she rubbed her face. She could still feel Shino’s warm tears drip down her face even if her tears had long dried out by now. She didn’t know why Shino was crying, but seeing her cry close up pulled on her heartstrings. Was Shino crying because she didn’t want to kill her? Or was she just frustrated that she missed her chance? It could also very well be another reason. Regardless, she was emotional about it.
Maihime had told Shino that she needed her. Shino was strong enough that with her on the battlefield, Maihime could feel more at ease.
But Shino’s strength wasn’t the reason why Maihime said she needed her—Maihime needed her emotionally. When Shino cried, Maihime was also crying inside. Being away from Shino like this was frustrating and sad, and she hated the fact there was a divide between them right now.
“What should I have done, Hotaru?” she said, hugging her own legs.
Nobody but the waves in the ocean answered her call.
“………………”
Suddenly, a shadowy figure appeared over her, which was weird because she didn’t notice anyone else in the park. She instinctively looked up to see a girl standing above her.
“It’s been a while, hasn’t it Mai~hime?” the girl said.
Maihime’s eyes widened. Hearing someone call her name that way was a blast from the past. The girl even said, “it’s been a while,” so she had to be someone who knew her from a ways back.
She rubbed her eyes and got a good look at the girl. She had a slender frame and was wearing the usual Kanagawa school uniform. The ponytail she tied behind her head swayed gently with the wind.
“Who… are you?” asked Maihime.
“I’m… Hotaru,” she said with a weird laugh. She put her hand on her chest. “I’m Rindou Hotaru.”
“Hotaru!?!?!?” Maihime leaned towards her. Surely enough, that girl had the same hairstyle as what Hotaru used to have, and even the way she stood was similar to how she used to stand. She was very similar to how Maihime remembered Hotaru to be.
Yet she knew this girl wasn’t Hotaru. Hotaru never referred to her as “Maihime” in the first place. She just didn’t *feel* like Hotaru. While Maihime didn’t know what Hotaru looked like right now, she felt she wouldn’t look like the girl in front of her.
“You… aren’t Hotaru, right? Maybe you two just share the same name? But I only know one Hotaru…”
“You really can’t tell?” the girl said with a confused look.
Maihime didn’t react too positively to that.
“It has been ten years, so I can’t be too surprised. Ten years for us, but 29 years for the world, huh…”
“29 years?” said Maihime. That was when she first entered the cold sleep… She thought for a few more moments before coming up with something.
“Oh! You’re Mari! Mari, right?!”

She was Itou Marika, Maihime's long lost friend before the cold sleep— the very same girl who was in the picture with Hotaru and Maihime. Maihime didn't recognize her at first because she had changed quite a bit, but she could tell now that she knew who she was.
Maihime excitedly jumped up and turned to her. "Mari! Thank goodness you're safe! If you're wearing that uniform it means you're in Kanagawa now? Why didn't you tell me?"
Marika bitterly smiled back without saying anything, which caught Maihime off guard. But she soon remembered something else and continued.
"Oh yeah! You were in the same shelter as Hotaru, right? Is she here too?!?"
Marika frowned. "After all this time… you still really like her, huh?" she asked sullenly.
"Well… yeah I do. Speaking of which, why did you say you were Hotaru? You even styled you hair the way she used to do.
"Do you really want to know?" Marika asked, her lips slowly twisting into a wicked smile. She reached up to Maihime's face as if she was going to stroke it.
But before she could touch her, Maihime immediately bent backwards to dodge a cone shaped yoyo object that whizzed by her head. She bent back so far her hand touched the ground, so she followed it up with a backflip to create some distance between her and Marika.
"Wow, you even dodged it close up, huh…" said Marika. "City heads really aren't for show, aren't they?"
Maihime glared back at her. She could make out faint wires that extended from Marika's right sleeve to her wrist.
"Marika, why…?"
"Why you ask?" She flipped her hand around which brought the yoyo back to her. "Why did I do that? I wanted to kill you, no? I mean, I didn't really think that could kill you, but you seemed to have your guard down so I might as well go for it."
Marika spoke like that was no big deal, like killing Maihime was just another day at the office. Her tone even made it sound like she was playing around, but Maihime felt a chill down her spine when she said it.
"This can't be… you're lying!"
"Stop kidding yourself. If I said I was lying, would you believe me? Actually, you probably would, so here: I'm lying! Why would I want to kill you?"
She opened her arms for an embrace, still maintaining that wicked smile on her face. Maihime, however, wasn't have any of it. She was naive, but not naive enough to believe her words. Besides, she felt a huge sense of dread from her right now.
She did *look* like Marika, but she just didn't *feel* like her. The girl in front of her was not the same Marika she knew from her childhood.
"What happened to you, Mari?"
Upon hearing that, Marika's instantly got rid of her smile.

“What are you talking about? Are you saying that I’ve changed? You really are so dumb,” replied Marika. “I’m sorry to say, but I’ve always been like this. Even before the war, even before we went into our cold sleep, even before we saw our first [Unknown]… I’ve always hated *hated* you.”
“Mari…?” Maihime couldn’t even comprehend what she had just said.
“You’re always in my way. Always so damn irritating! You’re always by Hotaru’s side, always wanting to be with her, always treating her so nicely… If you weren’t here, I’d be Hotaru’s only friend!’
“W-What?”
“Am I wrong? Hotaru’s mine, so why is she with you all the time? It doesn’t make sense! Hotaru wants to be with me, but with you in the picture nothing can go as we want!”
At this point Marika was pretty much ignoring everything Maihime was saying. Her eyes were clouded with hatred and she had so much resentment towards her she couldn’t think straight. It was as if the very essence of hatred itself was slowly dragging her into insanity, taking Maihime along with her.
Suddenly, her face loosened up into a more relaxing state. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter anyway, since I’m Hotaru now.”
“You’re… Hotaru?”
“Yes I am. I’m nice, I’m strong, and I’m amazing, so I’m Hotaru. See this hair? It suits me pretty well, doesn’t it? It was tough getting my fuzzy hair all straightened out like this, but it’s worth it in the end!” she said as she curled her hair with her finger. “I mean, you can’t be Hotaru with ugly looking hair. I wish I was taller too… Oh well, that comes with time.”
She spoke all cutesy, but Maihime still got the chills listening to her. She felt Marika wasn’t even human. Even though they were speaking the same language, she had no idea what Marika was talking about— not one bit.
Marika pointed a finger at her and said, “That’s why I’ll say the words Hotaru couldn’t say to you back then. You’re annoying. Don’t talk to us ever again.”
Maihime didn’t respond, not because she was still trying to see if the girl in front of her was Hotaru or not, but because she had never been hated this much before in her life. Being the target of this much animosity made her freeze up.
“Now, all I need is for you to disappear,” she said, stroking her chin. “So please die. You had Hotaru all your life, and now your turn is over. It’s my turn now.”
Once again, Maihime didn’t say a word back. She clenched her fists, knowing that even if she said something back, their conversation would go nowhere. Even though both her and Shino had vowed to kill her, the circumstances were much different this time around.
She backed off even more and pulled out her sword “Eris” that she had hidden away inside her overcoat. It reflected the full might of the sun once it was completely out, sending beams of light in all directions around her.

Maihime narrowed her eyes and pointed her sword at Marika. She really didn’t want to do this, but the situation was getting so out of control she had to say something.
“Mari. Enough with the jokes… I am the head of this city. If this goes on any longer, I’m going to take this seriously.”
Marika initially frowned upon hearing that, but soon went back to her usual twisted grin.
“You weren’t taking it seriously before? You really are too nice… it makes me want to vomit. Just die already, you whore.”
“Okay then. What a shame,” said Maihime. She took a deep breath and changed her mentality. The girl in front of her was no longer the friend she knew from before. She was an assassin trying to take her out. “Still, you really think you can kill me for real? I’m strong. That last attack you did was weak. Maybe if you were on par with Shino…”
Marika laughed. “You’re not wrong. You were the top fighter in Kanto for god knows how long. But hey, aren’t you underestimating me too much?” She waved both her hands upwards as if she was conducting a symphony. “Didn’t we all promise to defeat the evil demon lord?” she shouted out right after.
Immediately, Maihime felt the presence of someone coming up from behind her, so she turned around and lashed out with her sword to defend herself. She felt the heaviness of the attacker’s blade the moment their swords clashed, and it was so heavy shivers ran down her arm.
Who was the attacker? Maihime took one look at her and couldn’t believe her eyes. In front of her was none other than one of the Four Divine Pillars, Otonashi Zakuro. She didn’t want to believe it was really her, but there no mistaking her baggy eyes, her panda hoodie, and her two long braids. It didn’t help to see that she was holding her signature scythe with the little panda attachment, either.
“Zakuro… why?” shouted Maihime, but she didn’t have the luxury of waiting for an answer. In the next instant she sensed someone trying to kill her from below and saw Ginko running up with her right arm fully equipped with her claws. Luckily, she was able to use her foot to stop the attack, and with that momentum she jumped away to her left.
“Ginko, you too? Why??” she shouted in despair.
“What are you talking about its natural we help our friends right?” replied Zakuro.



“Yeah, exactly. Can you please die for our friend Hotaru’s sake, Maihime?” Ginko added on. She laughed with hollow eyes with Zakuro doing the same soon after.
Maihime couldn’t believe her ears.
Marika laughed hysterically. “What do you think? It’s wonderful, isn’t it? These two are my friends now. They’re willing to do anything for me, you know?”
Maihime realized what was going on with that. Zakuro and Ginko wouldn’t betray her like that, so they were probably influenced by Marika’s [World]. She got a quick glance at both their faces to confirm her suspicions before biting down on teeth in rage.
There was no way she could ever hurt those two, and she didn’t even want to kill Marika no matter how much Marika wanted to kill her. Her only option was to hold back and somehow restrain her, and—
“You’re probably thinking to knock me unconscious or something,” Marika interrupted with a laugh. “If it’s you, it’ll probably work too. But hey, I’m not gonna let that happen. I had some good people tell me what to do, you see…”
Marika snapped her fingers and instantly their surroundings warped mysteriously until a huge group of about a hundred students appeared around them.
“What is this…?” Maihime stood in awe. The students that just appeared out of nowhere were all wearing the same Kanagawa school uniform as she was, but they each had their own specialized weapon. Marika had somehow managed to control all of them as they all glared at Maihime in disgust.
Maihime wondered how they could just appear like that without her noticing. Well, she did know a girl who could could make things invisible…
“Sup Maihime,” Kurisu said as she too appeared out of nowhere. She then flashed a bunch of specialized throwing stars for Maihime to see after walking up next to Marika. “You’re cute as always…”
She hadn’t changed at all appearance-wise with her blonde hair and her mole under her lip, so Maihime recognized her instantly.
“Kurisu!” shouted Maihime. Of course, she didn’t forget one bit the crimes Kurisu had against the city. Speaking of which, she should have been locked up in their detention facility, but Marika probably broke her out.
Marika confirmed her suspicions. “When the [Unknowns] attacked back then,” she said, gently stroking Kurisu’s chin, “This girl here tried to kidnap you, didn’t she? But even though you had the strength to beat down every one of her goons, you still managed to get yourself captured, just so you could save the city from all those bombs. Aren’t you so badass… Oh look here, I’m Maihime! I’ll protect everyone!” she said sarcastically, throwing out her arms as an exaggeration. “You’ve always been like that. Always willing to sacrifice yourself. Always wanting to play the hero, even though you’re such an idiot. I can’t believe anyone actually likes you… and I

seriously can't understand why Hotaru says good things about you. Thinking about that actually makes me want to vomit."
Maihime glared back silently. She was triggered and she knew it, especially since all this came from an old friend. However, she understood the importance of controlling her emotions. If there was a time to do such a thing, it would be now. She carefully looked around to try to find a way to get out of this situation.
"Well, whatever," continued Marika. It was unclear whether she noticed Maihime plotting her way out. "It's because you're like that that I can take you down here and now. So, how're you gonna do it? If you hold back too much, you'll die~"
Once again, Maihime didn't say a single word.
"Wait, wait, this might not be enough. No worries, I have this too!" said Marika, snapping her fingers. Immediately, a single
bespectacled girl step forward from the crowd and came to her side.
Maihime gasped. "Aoi!" she shouted.
Indeed it was her. It seemed like Marika had the whole city under her control, which explained the smug look she had when Maihime reacted that way.
"Hey Aoi, please," she said, gently touching her on the shoulder.
"Absolutely." nodded Aoi. She took out a specialized knife and pressed it against her own neck.
"What are you doing Aoi!?!"
Aoi smiled. "It's fine… She's my friend. It's only natural I do something like this."
Her smile was so out of place Maihime got shivers down her spine. "Stop it! Friends don't do that to each other!"
"Shut up. Can you stop butting in?" said Marika. She swung her hand downward as a signal to everyone else to get ready for battle. Even Zakuro and Ginko were ready to fight Maihime to the death.
Maihime gripped her sword even tighter. She knew the best course of action was to get as far away from everybody as possible and throw out a nonfatal shockwave that could immobilize them.
As she was about to move, Aoi pushed the knife harder against the throat. This time, the knife cut through the thin first layer of her skin and she began to bleed from the neck.
"Aoi!" Maihime's attention was diverted for a brief moment which gave the opening everyone needed to jump at her, restraining her arms and legs and throwing her onto the ground.
Maihime was strong enough that she could easily blast everyone away with her brute strength, but she couldn't move as long as Aoi kept that knife pointed at herself.
Marika laughed even harder this time. "You're so nice aren't you! Yeah, if you let Aoi die here, what would Hotaru think?" she said, stroking her chin.

“Well then, I wanna just get this over with. You know what? I got the perfect friends to take care of you. Kurisu, do it.”
“Yes ma’am.”
Kurisu snapped her fingers once again to bring out her [World], and the air behind everyone then warped and warped until several giant grotesque things appeared above them.
“[Unknowns]!?!?!?!?” shouted Maihime. For the third time today she couldn’t believe her eyes.
There was no doubt about it. Each of those alien looking [Unknowns] were about three meters tall, and the very same ones that brought forth the great calamity in the first place.
Maihime couldn’t contain her emotions as she screamed, “Mari… Itou Marika. You bitch!”
Marika couldn’t contain herself seeing Maihime like that. She trembled in ecstasy at the thought of Maihime struggling before her.
“So, what do you think? Cute, aren’t they? I decided to make a few friends when they attacked last time, even if I can’t understand them at all. They still do anything I command them to do, so that doesn’t matter though! It wouldn’t be suspicious at all if you’re killed by one of these, right?”
She laughed hysterically while an [Unknown] walked up to Maihime as if on command. The students were well aware that it was coming through them, but none of them panicked at all. Instead, they just continued to stare at Maihime with their lifeless eyes as some of them made room for it to pass.
“What a turn of events. How many [Unknowns] have you killed? Hundreds? Thousands? Well, you’re about to be killed by a single one, and there’s nothing you can do about it!”
The [Unknown] got face to face to Maihime, opening its grotesque thing that was probably its head and revealing a big mouth.
“Fuc—”
“Ahahahaha!!!” interrupted Marika. “It feels so damn good being able to let everything out like this. This was what I needed all my life! This is the greatest day of my life! Alright, enough. Do it my friend.”
She dropped her hand for yet another signal. The [Unknown] understood her intentions even if it couldn’t understand her words, so it opened its mouth even wider and went to swallow Maihime whole.
Maihime’s lips trembled at the sight of the approaching [Unknown]. She was going to be eaten at this rate, but if she defended herself Marika would instantly make Aoi kill herself and possibly even more students after that. Maihime had to take that threat seriously because Marika clearly showed she wouldn’t hesitate to do such a thing. The whole city was her hostage.
Of course, Maihime did not want to die here. Even if there were so many more things she wanted to do in life, she would rather take her own life than let Aoi die.
The [Unknown] got closer and closer as her life flashed before her very eyes. She bit down hard on her teeth and tightened up her body to prepare

herself for the inevitable. What felt like an eternity was just a few seconds as the [Unknown] went for the kill, until…
Before anyone realized what happened, its head was cut clean off.
“What the—?”
Now headless, the [Unknown] collapsed dead onto the ground.
Maihime’s eyes widened because she had seen that move before. Even Marika couldn’t help but yell out in surprise as she trembled in fear.
The students holding Maihime down were also not left unscathed. In a flash they collapsed to the ground as well, albeit still with their heads intact. A single girl jumped over everyone else to where Maihime was immediately after, and even though she could move freely now, she was too fixated on that girl to do anything else.
“You’re… Shino?”
Her hair was tied in a ponytail and she was wearing the usual white uniform, but more importantly, she was using the new black katana that she had just received from Maihime. While they may have just fought to the death hours before, this time they stood on the battlefield as allies.
“Shino… why?” said Marika, but that went unnoticed by Shino.
Instead, she turned to Maihime with the biggest smile she could muster and said, “I’m sorry I’m late… Hime.”
“Huh?”
That smile… Those words… The way she called her… Maihime knew she had seen and heard all of this before. It didn’t take long for her to realize the girl in front of her was not just Shino, but also another girl she knew before.
“Hotaru….?”
Shino… no, Hotaru heard that and nodded.
Maihime had remnants of what Hotaru looked like back in the day, but because it had been ten years since they’ve last seen each other (twenty-nine if counting the cold sleep years), her memories of her were faint.
When she saw Shino for the first time she did see similarities between the two, but at the time Shino insisted she didn’t know Maihime at all. That, combined with the vastly different personalities, proved that she wasn’t Hotaru.



She wasn’t back then, but the girl here certainly was. The words she had said were all Maihime needed to hear to know.
“Oh my god…. Oh my god….” Maihime’s voice faded as she began to tear up. A decade of emotions that she had suppressed came welling up all at once. She was so surprised she couldn’t even stand properly anymore, instead opting to cling tightly to Hotaru for support.
“Hotaru!!!! Oh my god, Hotaru! I’ve been waiting for so long!! Because you know… our promise! I still remember!”
More and more tears continued to stream down her face and onto Hotaru’s uniform, but Hotaru was too busy patting her head and trying to calm her down to notice.
However, this beautiful moment was ruined by Marika screaming, “What the hell?!?” at the top of her lungs.
“How is this possible…” she continued shouting, “My [World]…”
Her lips were trembling to the point where she couldn’t even speak properly, and her knees got so weak she had to shuffle her feet to regain her composure.
“Your [World] is a real pain,” replied Hotaru, “but *you* were the one who released it for me, you know?”
“Huh?”
—
A few hours earlier, Shino was lying hidden on a roof after returning back to the city. She was paying close attention to a cafe’s open terrace below, where Hotaru and a bunch of other girls were seated. From a distance it seemed like they were nonchalantly chatting about ordinary girl things, but Shino knew that wasn’t the case. She knew full well about the usefulness of Hotaru’s [World] on information gathering, so she knew that’s what the girls were doing.
Shino’s had her doubts ever since she had to force herself not to deliver the final blow to Maihime as well as the headaches she got from trying to remember her past. At least now she knew that those also stemmed from Hotaru’s [World].
“Oh!”
At that moment, Hotaru finished talking and rose from her seat, prompting Shino to take action by bringing out her own [World]. She had some things she wanted to try but didn’t know if it would work. Regardless, she decided to just go for it because she had nothing to lose at this point.
She focused in on Hotaru’s hand and waited for the precise moment when she would touch the girl. With Shino’s [World] of being able to touch anything in her sight, she easily slid herself right in so that Hotaru was touching her as well.
As a result, Hotaru didn’t know she was actually touching Shino when she muttered the words, “Release.”
Instantly, Shino’s head went blank, followed by all her sealed memories being released at once. Fragments of her memories that she tried to piece

together before became crystal clear again, and slowly but surely she began to remember who she really was.
First was her name.
“That’s right, my name is…”
She was Rindou Hotaru, and the girl who had claimed to be Hotaru’s name was Itou Marika, one of her childhood friends along with Maihime. The memories came gushing back into her head until she remembered the most important thing of all: Her promise with Maihime.
—
“Hime…. I remember everything about us… and even you too, Marika. Even if you had been hiding your true [World] from me all this time, I didn’t expect it to be this substantial. You completely changed my memories — and even changed me as a person… my personality, my thoughts… what a scary [World] to be a part of. But now that I understand everything, you were the who made our section chief Kanaya give the order to kill Hime, weren’t you?
”
“Y-You’re wrong… No, you’re wrong!” Marika replied in a panic. She looked down on her hands as if they were stained with the blood of her crimes, realizing that things were spiraling out of control for her. “Shino… stop joking around, okay? It’s all their fault!”
“Marika.” coldly replied Hotaru, which made her almost cry.
“I did this for you…” she replied, her voice trembling. “Everything I do is for you… If Maihime wasn’t here, it’d just be the two of us!”
“So is that why you made me kill Hime?”
“Exactly! You understand me, right? Maihime’s the worst! Just when I received the power to get her away from you, this happens! Look at her not wanting to go inland because she’s waiting for you! You don’t even like Maihime!! You’re way better than that!”
“Mari…” Maihime didn’t know what else to say in her troubled state, but that went largely ignored by Marika.
“We still have time, Hotaru. Let’s kill her so we can finally be together, and you can finally tell me you like me in peace… Just like you’ve done with Maihime, right?”
“Marika.” said Hotaru once again, but this time she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. “I liked you. I will treasure the times we spent with Hime for the rest of my life.
“H-Hotaru…? What are you saying?”
She opened her eyes and stared straight at Marika. “But you aren’t the Marika I know. You took my memories for your own gain, and you certainly do not have the right to take Maihime’s life. Whoever you are right now, I. don’t. like. you.”
Hotaru’s words came down on Marika like lightning and froze her up until all hell broke loose.

“I… I….” she tried to speak, but could only make out a few sounds before crying her heart out.
“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!” she wailed out, holding her head in despair. Her scream caused all the students and [Unknowns] to lunge towards Hotaru and Maihime.
“Hime, get down.” Hotaru said calmly. She took out her katana and brought out her [World] to fight.
Ah, now I see…
She remembered why her [World] was the way it was. The only thing she had in her mind during the cold sleep was to reach out to Maihime and hold her. She never forgot her promise to her: that one day she would return back to her side.
With an efficient spin on her body, she managed to get everyone in her sight just as she swung her sword. Her one strike was so effective that all the students dropped to the ground after being hit by non lethal blows that ranged from the back of their neck to their stomachs. Seeing that they were being controlled, Hotaru held back by using the blunt side of her sword to ensure that no one died.
While that was enough to take out most of the people, the Divine Pillars and the [Unknowns] remained unfazed. Ginko and Zakuro dodged her attack with their speed, while the [Unknowns] just took the brunt of it with their high armor. Aoi and Kurisu on the other hand were hidden somewhere behind everyone, so Hotaru couldn’t reach them even if she wanted to.
Now it was time for their counterattack. Ginko, Zakuro, and the [Unknowns] rushed in at the same time, each with with their own frightening power. Hotaru didn’t have the strength to counter all of their attacks, but at the same time she would be killed if she took those attacks straight on.
“Hotaru!” This time it was Maihime who came to the rescue.
Without even so much a glance between the two, Hotaru knew exactly what Maihime was about to do, so she jumped towards the [Unknowns] and said, “Thanks,” as they passed by each other. Even now, her research on Maihime came in handy despite this time being allies and good friends.
“Leave them to me!” Maihime shouted back.
Hotaru brought out her [World] and sliced the [Unknown’s] heads clean off with a bright flash of light. At the same time, Maihime slammed her large sword down onto the ground and approached the two barehanded.
Zakuro turned invisible and went to go for Maihime’s blind spot, but it was Maihime who got to her first with her excellent footwork. She used some old-fashioned hand to hand technique to dance around her before slamming her open palm into Zakuro’s stomach. Maihime’s moves were so fast Zakuro had no idea what had happened as she collapsed onto the ground.
Before Maihime had time to pull back, Ginko rushed up from under her and went for Maihime’s head with her claws. However, Maihime pulled down even lower to the point where she was basically crawling on the ground and

struck Ginko on the chin with her open palm like she did with Zakuro on her way up. As a result, she yelled out in pain and collapsed onto her back.
“Nice!” Maihime shouted, giving herself a fist bump.
Hotaru was blown away. Not only had Maihime fought them at the same time without her weapon, she managed to subdue them in only a few seconds whereas Hotaru had struggled against them individually.
Maihime was undoubtedly the strongest of the strongest. Hotaru could do nothing but smile in awe at her overwhelming power.
Yet the battle was far from over.
“Kurisu! Aoi!” Marika’s voice still trembled as she called out to them.
“Fine…!”
Kurisu took out six invisible throwing knives and threw them in Maihime and Hotaru’s general direction, while Aoi went to stab her own neck with the dagger.
“Hime,” Hotaru motioned calmly once again.
“Got it!”
That was all it took for them to formulate a plan. Hotaru slammed her foot onto the ground and transferred that force to push Aoi’s dagger far away from her. At the same time, Maihime dashed to her sword and blew all the daggers back with just one gigantic swing.
“Huh?” said Kurisu. She couldn’t believe her eyes. While Hotaru would have a hard time blocking each knife, all Maihime had to do was create a shockwave big enough to knock them all away.
Hotaru wasn’t done with her foot just yet. Kurisu’s shocked reaction created an opening for Hotaru to get a good look at her, so with another stomp to the ground she kicked the back of Kurisu’s head. It was a hard kick— the force was enough to knock her out onto the ground.
At last, only Marika remained. Once she was defeated, perhaps everyone would return to normal. Hotaru realized this and made her way to Marika, sidestepping through the [Unknown’s] large corpses along the way.
“Hotaru, please…” Marika cried out to her in tears. She reached out both her hands as if she was planning to stop Hotaru with a hug.
But Hotaru remained unfazed.
“Forgive me, Marika,” Hotaru whispered back. Her blade glowed as she knocked her unconscious like she did to the others.
Soon after, Maihime ran up into her arms right after while repeatedly saying, “Hotaru…”
“That was perfect, Hime!”
“Y-Yeah!”
Maihime was so overjoyed she couldn’t help but cry right into Hotaru once again as the two hugged. Even though Hotaru had heard Maihime’s voice so many times before, this time it felt different. This time was more… nostalgic. The girl in her arms wasn’t the terrible dictator that she had to kill, but rather just one whose had the weight of the city pressed down on her small shoulders.

Hotaru couldn't imagine the struggles Maihime had to endure to get to this point, yet there was no doubt she managed to overcome everything that was thrown her way. That's why Maihime was here… It had been a while, but the two were finally reunited.
Hotaru gently stroked the top of Maihime's head while comforting her by saying, "Hime…"
But, that moment of serenity was broken when Hotaru noticed an [Unknown] stand up among Marika and the rest of the students.
"What the
—!" she shouted. There was no way they could have missed it since Hotaru did double check all the bodies. This [Unknown] had to have been turned invisible by Kurisu as a backup in case things went south for them. Now that Marika's [World] no longer influenced it, it reverted back to the human-killing monster it had always been known for.
"Marika! Hey Marika!" yelled Hotaru, but it was too late. The [Unknown] swooped up Marika with its mouth and made its way back to the ocean.
Tsk!
Hotaru focused in on the retreating [Unknown] so she got bring out her [World] for the final time and settle things once and for all. It didn't take much time for her to cut it down, but the [Unknown] had gone far enough that under it was a long drop down into the ocean.
"Marika!" shouted Hotaru. She ran towards her without hesitation, though she wasn't going to make it in time.
But somebody was. From the corner of her eye, she saw Maihime catch up and eventually overtake her as she made her way towards Marika with frightening speed, so fast that each step she took cracked the ground. For the last time today, Hotaru would be reminded why Maihime was the strongest fighter she had ever known.
"Hime?!?!"
"Marika!!" shouted Maihime. She jumped over the broken down fence on the cliff and caught Marika in the air, sending both of them spiraling down into the water.
Hotaru finally made it to the edge of the cliff, and immediately caught the two in her sight. With her [World] active, she was able to grab onto them before they fell down completely. They were heavy and her arms felt like giving up, especially since Hotaru was using her [World] as a proxy, but she couldn't let go now. She used up all the strength she could muster with each pull and eventually managed to get them back onto the cliff.
"Are you alright, Hime?" she asked once they were all on the ground.
"I'm fine!" smiled Maihime, gently laying Marika on the ground. "Thanks! That was a bit scary for me…."
"Why did you do that? If I wasn't there, you would have fell all the way down…"
Maihime slumped down. "Yeah, I'm sorry…"
"But why…"

“Huh?”
“Why did you save her? Didn’t she try to kill you?”
“Well, weren’t *you* the one who cut that [Unknown] down?” Maihime said jokingly.
“I guess….” Hotaru couldn’t deny that. After all, she was the one who made the first move.
“Besides, I didn’t think I would die even if I dropped all the way down, and —”
“And?”
“She’s our friend.”
Hotaru sighed.
“Yeah, you’re right, Hime,” she said, gently patting the top of her head.

Epilogue: Another Promise

"Are you really okay with this?" asked Maihime.
Hotaru nodded. She was sitting in a chair in the old park near the ocean they used to go when they were children while Maihime was standing right behind her, getting close enough that their shadows were intertwined as one.
"Okay then, here I go!" said Maihime. She nervously raised a pair of scissors up to Hotaru's bangs.
Now that she had some recreational time, Hotaru wanted to have her hair cut in the perfect place she could think of. Twenty nine years ago, she made a promise with Maihime at this very park. She couldn't help but stare out into the ocean as Maihime cut her hair.
The view never changed, and probably never will.
"You know, I heard Mari woke up yesterday night," said Maihime.
Hotaru stayed silent for a few moments before replying with, "I see… and the Administration Bureau?"
"Nothing yet."
Hotaru sighed. Luckily, Maihime had gotten the gist of her question, so she didn't need to explain further.
"In any case," said Hotaru. "I'm no longer with them, so I'm gonna stay here. What about you?"
"Same. I really don't feel like going inland… I stayed here to wait for you, but now I have a whole city to protect."
"I see…" Hotaru replied yet again, but this time in a faint whisper. "It's hard to believe that Marika didn't get any punishment yet from them, even with everything she'd done."
"Yeah…"
"Which makes it all the more possible that she could get into an 'accident' and die there if we sent her to them."
Maihime nodded in agreement. "Hey Hotaru, can I ask you something?"
"What is it?"
"What if we had just let her die yesterday?"
Hotaru didn't answer right off the bat because the same thought had also crossed her mind. As Marika said herself, it wouldn't have been unusual for students to be killed by the [Unknown]. With her gone, the Bureau loses yet another important agent in Kanagawa to threaten them.
"What do you think, Hime? She might come for you again."
"Yeah, that'd be troublesome… but in the end I guess I didn't want her to die. We're all survivors of this war, after all."
"You really are strong, Hime."
"No I'm not!" laughed Maihime.
She continued to clip Hotaru's hair bit by bit as the two enjoyed the scenery around them. If they didn't know any better, they might as well still have

been in the past before everything began. After all, ever since they had awoken from their slumber, Maihime had been protecting this very place in hopes that Hotaru would come back.
“I’m sorry, Hime,” said Hotaru. She knew the huge burden Maihime had carried on her little shoulders.
“Huh? For what?”
“I made you wait all this time…”
“It’s okay! I promised, right?”
Maihime smiled the brightest she had ever smiled. Seeing her in that carefree state made Hotaru smile as well.
After about an hour, Maihime finally finished.
“Alright, done!” she exclaimed, putting the finishing touches on Hotaru’s hair.
Hotaru stood up, turned around, and said, “So, how do I look?”
“Perfect! It fits you so well… You’ve become more like Hotaru, if that makes any sense.”
“It doesn’t…” Hotaru tried to keep a straight face but couldn’t help cracking up, which caused Maihime to do the same.
“Welcome back, Hotaru.”
“Glad to be back.”
They continued to savor the moment by staring at each other for a while longer.
“You know, it still feels really weird,” said Hotaru. “We met each other almost a month ago…”
“Yeah…”
Hotaru paused for a brief moment to compose herself before continuing.
“Hey Hime…”
“What is it?”
“I have another promise to make.”
“Another?”
“I promise to become your right hand woman forever. I’ll come to your aid whenever necessary, and stay by your side forever and ever.”
“Hotaru, you don’t have to do that…” replied Maihime, but Hotaru stuck out her pinky anyway.
With a timid laugh of her own, Maihime completed their new pinky promise.
—
Marika had already been thrown in Kanagawa’s detention facility before the day was even over. It wasn’t the exact same room as the one Kurisu had been detained in, but the room was similar enough in that it had nothing but a toilet in it. She had just been in here for a bit, but she was beginning to understand the boredom Kurisu had been complaining about.
However, Marika couldn’t stop thinking about Hotaru… and Maihime. Even now, she still loved Hotaru. That fact hadn’t changed ever since she assumed her identity ten years ago and she never regretted it one bit. She

couldn’t help but remember fondly on all the missions they did together until she couldn’t hide her secret any more.
Shino returned to being Hotaru, and as a result, she returned to being Marika. Even worse, Hotaru bluntly stated that she hated her and somehow she ended up being saved by Maihime.
She wondered why Maihime would do such a thing… even after all the things she had done to her, Maihime still chose to forgive. In any case, she no longer wanted her to die. Perhaps it was a sense of awe and wonder at Maihime’s actions that caused her sudden change of emotion. Perhaps not. Regardless of what she did, Marika still hated her guts. Or did she? She couldn’t tell anymore.
There was one thing she knew for certain, though. No matter what she did, she could never get in between Maihime and Hotaru. She remembered the beautiful smile Hotaru gave to Maihime on the battlefield.
“Ugh….” She plopped down on her bed. “She didn’t even show me that once in the past ten years…”
She frowned, but the suddenly click of the steel door unlocking soon caught her attention.
“Huh? The Administration’s here for me already?” she said grumpily. “That’s faster than I thought…”
Well, now that she thought about it, it wasn’t too strange. Yes, she was being disposed faster than Kurisu was, but she was an agent of the Bureau. By now, her boss Kanaya was probably freed from her [World], so the Bureau probably wanted to take care of her as soon as possible to avoid any unnecessary leaks.
Marika didn’t really want to think about how they would kill her. Still, no one seemed to come in even with the door open. Marika eyed it suspiciously as she got up from her bed. She couldn’t see anyone outside.
“Hey!” someone suddenly shouted right in her ear.
“Woah!” Marika jumped back in shock.
“Ahahaha!” said Kurisu, appearing out of nowhere. “That was a pretty cute squeal you just did.”
“You!”
“Sup, Hotaru… wait, no. Marika?” she replied jokingly.
Marika patted her chest in an effort to calm herself down before continuing.
“Why are you here…” she said. “Weren’t you caught too?”
“Don’t be ridiculous. How could they catch me when I can go invisible in the midst of all those unconscious students, [Unknowns], and god-knows-what that were out there at that park?”
She wasn’t wrong. Even Maihime would have a hard time catching her if she turned invisible and ran away.
“So if you’re so great, why did you come visit the lowly me? I don’t feel like talking to anyone right now, you know…”
“Hey don’t take it out on me just cuz you had your heart broken.”

Marika glared back at her, but Kurisu wasn't necessarily wrong so she couldn't say anything back at her.
Kurisu shrugged. "I just came to return a favor. You probably weren't doing it for my sake, but you did bust me out once before, so I thought I'd do the same to you and let you go free."
"What about you? What are you planning to do?"
"Me? Hmm… I obviously can't stay here or go back to Tokyo for that matter, so maybe I'll head to Chiba. Who knows? I might end up in a completely different place altogether. There's a lot more cities in this country, right?" she said and then grinned. "Wait. You don't want to come with me, do you? I'm cool with it actually. You don't seem to have any friends, so I'll be your first one. We are fellow Maihime rejects, after all."
She ended by reaching out her hand for a handshake, but Marika just eyed her suspiciously.
"Why me?" she asked.
"With your [World] by my side, I could live wherever I want however I want," replied Kurisu.
"Wow you sure are blatant about that…" Marika paused for a few seconds before busting out a laugh. "But I guess you're right. It would be pretty fun to have your [World] at my disposal, too."
Marika went for the handshake until Kurisu quickly withdrew her hand.
"What was that for?"
"No, it's just that I remembered it'd be bad if you touched me… you know."
Marika sighed. "You're awfully careful for someone who wanted to be my friend just now…"
"That's a separate matter. This is different."
"Fine. Just know that I'll be able to touch you all I want in your sleep, then."
"That's kinda hot actually… But hey, all I have to do is turn invisible first before I sleep, right?"
"You sure do."
The two left the room together while still eyeing each other suspiciously.
—
Now that they were finished, Hotaru and Maihime started to walk back to the city.
"By the way, Hime…"
"What is it?"
"This blade," said Hotaru, taking out her black katana and showing it to her. "You said you made it, so did you give it a name?"
"Oh, I haven't told you yet! I certainly did," she replied. In an exaggerated fashion she puffed her chest out and struck a pose. "That blade is like the brightest star in the night sky, the one that strikes fear in all enemies alike: The Shining Blade of The Red Star and Maihime!"
"The Shining Blade of the Red Star… and Maihime?"

“That is correct. All sword names need to have the person who made it, right? But including everyone from that department is a bit… Well, I’m the one who made it! They were really helpful, though… Still, it’s okay, right?” Hotaru couldn’t help but crack a laugh.
“Is that… a no?”
“No, no, definitely not,” replied Hotaru. “It’s just a huge weight to carry when you stick your name on it like that. How could I ever face you again if I lost and disgraced your name?”
“You’re thinking to much into it…” chuckled Maihime.
As they continued to walk, they suddenly saw Ginko, Zakuro, and Aoi coming from the opposite side.
“Hey!” Ginko called out to them.
Zakuro followed up with her own greetings. “How’s it going Maihime and Shino wait no Hotaru.”
Unlike the other two, Aoi was incredibly flustered. “Finally! I was looking for you guys!”
“What’s going on, Aoi?”
“It’s bad! Marika escaped! She’s gone!”
“Say what?” Hotaru.
“It seems like Kurisu helped her escape. I also got a report of a missing vehicle… so they probably used that after they got out!”
Hotaru and Maihime instinctively turned to look at each other and both burst out laughing.
“What’s so funny you two?” asked Zakuro.
“A-Ah, it’s nothing. Sorry,” said Maihime.
“Yeah, my bad. I just thought it was kind of funny.”
Their responses just made the others even more confused, but Ginko cut straight to the chase.
“In any case,” she said, “this is serious! Let’s get—”
Her words were cut short by the all too familiar siren that indicated [Unknowns] were coming.
“Why now of all times?!?!” she finished in frustration.
“Hurry, we’ve got to get ready!” shouted Aoi.
“Calm down, everyone,” said Maihime, clapping her hands once to get their attention. “You all know what to do. Go, this isn’t anything new!”
“Yes, ma’am!” they said with a salute. They were gone in an instant, leaving Hotaru and Maihime behind.
“Should we go too, Hime?”
“Yes, let’s do it,” nodded Maihime. Her lips slowly curled up into a smile before she said one last thing.
Let’s go save the world one more time.


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